Action - "MEN OF RED MESA" - Novelette

July 5th — Twice a Month

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15¢

"HERITAGE OF HATE"

A complete Range Mystery
by
CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS

THE TROUBLE SHOOTER
By N. C. Wyeth

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WEST

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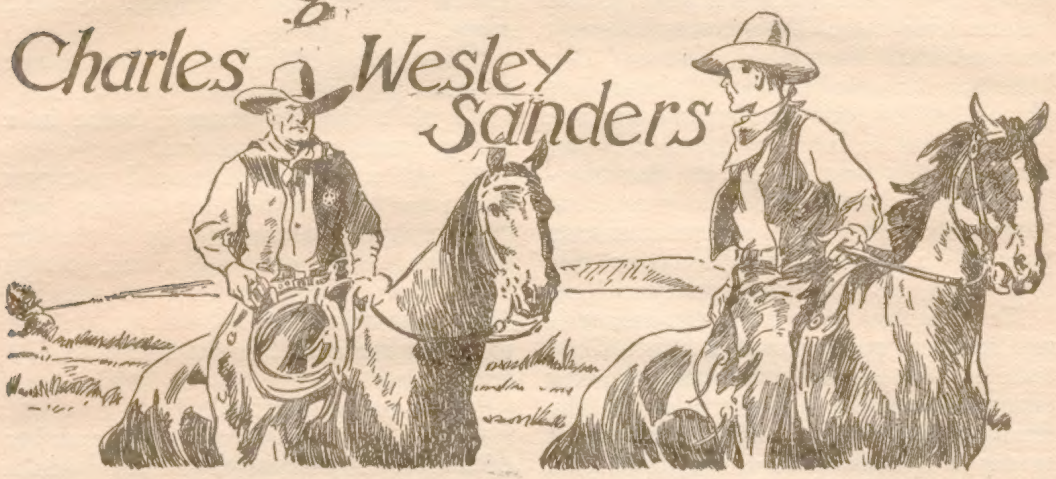
WEST

Twice A Month July 5th

HERITAGE of HATE



Author of "Young Lightning", etc.

Clinton, riding into a new country, wanted chiefly a good saddle horse and a job. He made a trade for the first, and was bested by the crafty Haun; then, without asking for the second, he found a task on his hands that involved murder, and mystery, and the wistful beauty of Agatha Haun.

CHAPTER I

HORSE AND HORSE

AT THE hail that floated up to his ears, Clinton stopped. He looked down on a clipped alfalfa field from the elevated, winding road which he had been following, with his horse at a walk. A man in overalls and blue shirt stood looking up at him.

This was a region of small farms, cut out of what had once been all cattle country. Clinton had just left a town which had sprung up in the last twenty years or so because of the coming of a denser population. He had arrived in that town by train and had bought there the horse he rode. Back of that town was a forest reserve in which sheep were grazed. Beyond it, in the direction in which Clinton was now headed, was more rugged country, still given to cattle raising.

Clinton had learned that there were any number of small outfits through there and one big outfit. The purchase of the horse and a saddle and a bridle had depleted his stock of ready money. He thought there was an almost sure chance of getting on with the big outfit. The name was familiar to him; it was one known through many States.

"Come down here," the man below him said. "Want to talk to you."

Descent from where Clinton's horse stood was impossible. There was a sheer drop of thirty feet. However, he knew that the man would not have invited him down if there had been no way to get down, and he walked his horse along the road till he came to a rocky incline which dropped directly into the field.

The man had kept pace with him inside the fence, and he came up to a gate which was set in the fence at the bottom of the incline.

He was a middle aged man, keeping

his flesh as some men do in spite of hard work. The fat would have given his face a stolid look if his eyes had not been so bright. Whatever stolidity there was, was lost on Clinton, for he was a direct young man and he had a habit of seeking the eyes of anyone to whom he talked. He looked straight into this man's eyes now. In spite of their brightness, he saw that the eyes were shallow; there was an effect of flatness in them. Clinton had seen eyes like that before. This man, Clinton now believed, was selfish. He would, Clinton felt, look out for number one. Clinton had always had to look out for number one himself, but differently from the way in which this man looked out for number one. Clinton was merely cautious because he knew that an incautious man was likely to be imposed upon; this other man, he felt sure, was avaricious.

He took his eyes from the farmer's and let them run across the field. They took in the small house and the big barns which doubtless made up the farmer's home outfit. They traveled on across a further field to foothills, and then they climbed the mountains, mountains wooded halfway up and then bald beyond that.

Scenery did not especially appeal to Clinton. He had glimpsed a good deal of it, here and there. He was only superficially aware of what his eyes took in. He was giving the farmer a chance to size him up. He had known somehow that the farmer wanted that chance.

"That horse is a big brute for your purpose, ain't he?" the farmer asked.

"I bought him in town this morning," Clinton answered. "He was the best I could find. Can you tell at a glance what a man wants a horse for?"

His own eyes went to the shallow ones quickly. His tone, more than his words, had been almost insulting. He was young and he leaped to likes and dislikes. He did not like this man.

The farmer's eyes did not burn. Those shallow orbs seemed incapable of holding a deep light. Only a flicker of resentment slid over them; it was like a passing light flickering over a smooth stone, Clinton thought—over mottled marble perhaps, for the farmer's eyes were not quite blue, not quite gray. They were made up of flecks of color.

But the farmer controlled himself. Anger could come to him readily, Clinton saw, but he could control it if it seemed likely to interfere with any purpose he had.

"I can tell a puncher when I see one," he said with a faint, forced smile. "I don't think your hands ever held a plow handle, and that is a work horse you have got there."

"Oh, well, hop to it," Clinton said. "You have got somethin' on your mind. I reckon your idea is that this horse would serve your purpose better'n mine."

"You got a bill of sale?" the farmer asked.

"I ain't ridin' a strange horse in a strange country without one."

"I got a horse that would suit you down to the ground," the farmer said. "He ain't no hammerheaded brute like that one. Weighs three hundred pounds less. Spry, like a cricket. I got him from a puncher that'd been workin' for the Higgins and Treadwell outfit. I'll trade you."

"*You* got a bill of sale?"

"Boy, I own a considerable number of things. I got a paper to back up each one."

"Let's have a look at the cricket."

"Folla me. My name is Haun."

"I been wearin' the same name all my life. It's Clinton."

"Come along, Mr. Clinton. I need a work horse. You need a saddler."

HE WALKED off across the field and Clinton followed him. They passed the house and came to a stable which was a lean-to against the big barn. As Clinton slipped from his hammerheaded mount, Haun went into the stable and came out leading a roan horse. Clinton felt his eyes begin to brighten, but he dulled the look. The problem of money was acute with him. As matters now stood Haun wanted his horse. He had not indicated that he wanted Haun's horse. He must keep that little advantage.

Haun said nothing. He led the horse beyond Clinton twenty feet and stopped him. Clinton sized him up. So far as he could judge, in this superficial examination, this horse would suit his purpose much better than the one he now owned.

"You can make a trade with me," he said.

"Throw your gear onto him then."

"Twenty dollars to boot," said Clinton.

Haun looked up from beneath the brim of his sloppy felt hat. He was a shrewd trader, Clinton saw, and necessarily a fair judge of men, at least when men became traders. Clinton made his face impassive. There was no hint of eagerness in it. He stood motionless. Haun considered, staring. He seemed to find nothing in Clinton to aid him. He took a little, convulsive breath, like a sigh. Parting with money was apparently hard for him.

"Done," he said. "Shift your gear while I get the money."

He went over to the rear door of the house and entered it. Clinton changed saddle and bridle and still Haun did not come out. He had to dig up the money from some secure hiding place, Clinton supposed. He nursed money, that fella.

Clinton led his new horse about the barnyard. He could find nothing wrong with the animal. From his mouth Clinton judged he was still in his prime. Now he seemed intelligent and gentle. Of course he might be an entirely different kind of a horse when a man forked him. An unmounted horse might stand with drooping head and become a perfect devil when a man sprang to the saddle. That didn't bother Clinton. He had ridden all kinds. He would try out the horse before the deal was completed. He could be no more than slammed to the ground.

Aware, out of the corner of his eye, that someone had emerged from the door through which Haun lately had gone, Clinton looked in that direction. He supposed it was Haun returning, but it was not Haun. It was a girl, a girl in a gingham dress, with a pail in her hand. Clinton was conscious only for a moment of the plainness of her garb. He was aware that it clothed a strong, straight body, and then he was more acutely aware of a smooth white throat, an apple cheeked face, and thick brown hair.

He had not known many girls. He had punched cows in the hinterlands mostly, where old-time conditions mostly prevailed. A good deal a man's country, like the ancient range, far flung, with human habitations not as frequent as where the farmers had come.

He saw that the girl was headed toward a well back of the house. A clean, decent feeling of respect flooded through him. There was no insinuation in his manner as he strode up to the girl. His face was grave. "Can I get the water for you, ma'am?" he asked.

The girl glanced over her shoulder. Instinctively Clinton's eyes followed hers. Haun had come to the door. He was standing in it, looking at the girl and Clinton. He was motionless, waiting. The girl's color deepened till it burned. She sent a fleeting look straight into Clinton's eyes.

"No," she said without asperity. And as she moved away, she tardily added, "Thank you."

As she started again toward the well, Haun came through the door and walked over toward the horses. Clinton moved in their direction, too. He did not look at the girl, for he did not need to do that. He had a picture of her in his mind, bright, vivid, a picture which remained there without any effort on his part.

Chapter II

BROKEN SAGE

CLINTON and Haun were on the road, a mile from Haun's house. Haun had wanted to close the deal at once, but Clinton had insisted on riding the horse. Haun had accompanied him on the bigger animal. Clinton had found nothing wrong with the horse. It had accepted his mounting with only a willing lift of its head. Haun had said that he was no bucker; Clinton needn't be afraid of that. There wasn't, in fact, a thing wrong with him "—not a brack in him," the farmer said.

"He may be a little soft; been standin' in the stable," said Haun. "Might take it easy with him."

Clinton had taken it easy. He had walked the horse most of the way and then had let him lope. He had a good motion.

Clinton halted now. "Here's my paper," he said. "Let's have the twenty and your paper."

Haun accepted Clinton's bill and handed over his own and a soiled twenty dollar bill. Clinton pushed them into his pocket. He lifted his hand in farewell.

"I would take it easy with that horse for quite a while," said Haun.

Clinton turned in his saddle to look

at the farmer. There was a taunting smile on his thick lips. Something was wrong, Clinton knew, but the deal was closed. He had made it with his eyes open. If he had been stung, he would have to stand for it.

Haun lifted his own hand and brought it down smartly on his thigh. The big horse moved off. Clinton sat watching the farmer till the latter was out of sight. Then he leaned out of the saddle, on one side and then on the other, running his eyes over the horse.

"Hoss," he said, "you an' me could be good friends. On'y thing is that you have got to be a good hoss or I can't afford to keep you. I'll have to try you out."

He sent the willing little animal into a run. The horse got away easily, lightly. He kept a good pace on the hard road for perhaps a third of a mile. Then Clinton felt a preliminary faltering in him. Clinton gave him his head to see what he would do, though he kept himself in readiness to pull him up if he should stumble. Stumble he did, with a kind of buckling of his knees. Clinton pulled his head far up and kept him from going down.

"So that's it!" said the puncher grimly to himself.

Dismounting he knelt before the horse and examined the forelegs minutely. He ran his hands over them and discovered that something was wrong. Putting a hand below one knee, he brushed up with it. Beneath the thin hair there was a thickening of the skin. Clinton thought there was a slight shortening up there. The horse had been hurt some time, and weakness instead of stiffness had resulted. The animal was capable of a fairly long walk, a shorter lope, and a brief sprint, but his endurance had been lessened materially by his injury. So far as Clinton was concerned, he was an absolutely worthless piece of horseflesh.

Clinton stood up and took off his hat and rubbed his red brown hair. He was no welcher. He could not ask Haun to take back the horse. He had made the deal with his eyes open, and would have to let it stand. However, there was no reason in the world why he should not pay his compliments to the trickster.

As he mounted, Clinton thought of the red cheeked girl. He had a notion now that she had been going to let him fetch the water for her till she had turned and had seen Haun in the doorway. She had seemed to be a little afraid of Haun, and certainly had disliked him. Maybe she would enjoy hearing someone give Haun a dressing down.

Clinton was halfway back over the road by which he and Haun had come when, watching for a first glimpse of the Haun house, he saw a horse below him. Just here the country was plain sagebrush land stretching off toward the mountains. Clinton supposed that there was no water by which it might be transformed into farm land. His eyes held the horse briefly, slipped away from it, went back to it.

"Well, that's my old hammerhead," he said. "Haun got back home quick. Wonder what he turned that horse out there for. Don't see any fence."

He stopped the little horse and gazed at the hammerhead intently. "Stripped of saddle and bridle," he told himself. "Haun must have turned him loose here. Funny he would pack that heavy saddle for half a mile."

He was puzzled, but he knew that he could get no answer by sitting there, staring at the wandering horse. He started his new mount again. After the exercise, in that short wait, the horse had stiffened. He moved his forelegs as if they pained him. Clinton did not urge him and presently he stopped, shaking his head as if he were disgusted with himself.

"Well, this won't do, little fella," Clinton said. "I can't ride a lame horse."

He dismounted and looked toward the hammerhead. The latter had turned and was walking toward him, seeking such clumps of grass as the barren land afforded. Clinton went to the edge of the road and whistled. The horse lifted his head, and when he saw one of his own kind on the road, he trotted toward it.

The horse proved itself willing to be caught, and Clinton changed saddles. Mounting, he started the hammerhead, expecting the smaller horse to follow. It did follow, for a few steps which seemed increasingly painful to it. Clinton knew that rest would be the best thing for it, and he turned his horse and headed the other off into the sand. It wandered for a few minutes, seeking

the scarce grass, and then it lay down, heavily.

NO SENSE of mystery, no disconcerting thought had come to Clinton so far. He was even free of anything like that as he turned his horse in the direction of Haun's house. Then that sense descended so suddenly upon him that he held the horse in check in the road. For several seconds he sat in his saddle, staring straight in front of him. He did not know what had happened; it was a kind of arresting seizure. When he recovered a little, he found that he had been listening—for what, he did not know. Slowly he turned his head. There was nothing in the scene to mystify or to startle him. There, on one side, were the sagebrush plain, the foothills, and the distant mountains. To his right was thinly wooded ground, rising to a ridge.

"Gosh," he told himself aloud, "there's somethin' funny about this."

Suddenly he clapped heels to the horse, and it bounded off down the road. He swung in at the Haun place and sped up to the house. The girl, apparently having heard him, came immediately to the door. Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw that Clinton and not Haun had arrived.

"Your father—" he began.

"Uncle," she corrected him.

"Oh, yes. Where is he?"

Without answering, she left the doorway and walked out to him; she kept her eyes, still wide, on his face. She seemed to be attempting to gather something from his expression, but he knew she was gathering nothing, for he could feel the blankness of his expression.

"Why," she said, "he hasn't been back since he rode away with you."

She had been standing below him, close. Now she suddenly retreated, and some of her high color ebbed out of her cheeks.

"You are riding that other horse," she said. "How is that? Where is the pony he traded to you?"

"The pony went lame," Clinton explained. "I found this horse in the sand over here. I took him up and changed the saddle."

"Where did you leave my uncle?"

"A mile or so from here. We made the trade and he started back. When the pony went lame, *I* started back. I was going to roust him a little. I wasn't really mad at him, ma'am. I—I think I was just going to ride him some, though. He took me in neatly."

"Did you look for any sign along the road?"

"Why, I didn't. What do you mean, ma'am? A sign of struggle?"

She ran her eyes over him, taking him all in, his leather chaps, his blue shirt, open at the throat, his coat, his tight boots, his wide hat.

"You seem to suspect somethin', ma'am," he said gently. "You ain't suspectin' me, I hope."

She had finished her scrutiny and now she opened and closed her eyes two or three times as she relaxed them from that fixed stare.

"No, oh, no," she said. "Wait here." She started for the house on a run. Halfway there she stopped and looked over her shoulder. "Throw a saddle on the bay in the far stall," she ordered.

As he led the bay into the yard a few minutes later, she emerged from the house, clad in breeches, blouse and boots. Before Clinton could offer to assist her, she sprang nimbly to the saddle and was off toward the road. Clinton followed. He saw that he would have to urge his horse to keep up with the sleek little bay.

He managed it, however. He was thundering behind her when she dragged her horse to a stop a little distance beyond where Clinton had first sighted the horse amid the sage. His horse carried him beyond her before he could bring him down. The hammerhead was a tough mouthed brute and not sensitive to the bit. Clinton wheeled him around, so that the two horses faced each other. The girl was pointing.

"Look there!" she said.

He looked where she indicated. Half a dozen clumps of sage grew there, close to the road. They were pariahs growing at the edge of the junipers. One of them was broken. Clinton could picture how it had been broken. A heavy body had been thrown on it or had fallen.

His eyes went beyond the sage, up toward the ridge among the trees. There was a trail in the earth as if the body which had broken the clump of sage had been dragged. Low hanging limbs on two trees had been broken.

He returned his gaze to the girl.

Slowly she twisted about in the saddle. Their eyes met.

"We'd better go up there," she said in a low voice.

"I'll go alone," said Clinton.

"No; I'll go with you."

They slipped down from their horses and began to climb the ridge together, up among the trees.

Chapter III

BRUTE'S WORK

THEY emerged presently from the trees and came to the bare lift of the ridge. They had followed the trail easily. There was something curious about that trail, Clinton saw. At first it seemed only as if some inanimate object had been dragged up it, but then it widened in places as if the object had come to life and had thrust out in a struggle to free itself. Twice there were places where the bark on trees had been broken. Clinton could guess that a heavily booted, plunging foot had struck against those trees.

To enable them to climb to the top of the ridge now, it was necessary for Clinton to give the girl his hand. She took it in a firm, warm clasp and fell a little behind him, so that she could pull against him when necessary in the ascent. She was more rugged than most girls of the day; there was no emphasized slenderness about her, and at no time was she a drag on him. She came after him lightly and quickly. So they gained the top of the ridge.

Clinton, with the girl a little behind him, paused there, and looked down the other slope. The marks of the dragged object, he saw, were on top of the ridge and went on down over it toward the trees half way down. It was lost in these trees, and he had a notion that it might definitely end there. When he went down there, he might make a gruesome discovery. He turned to the girl.

"You had better stay here for a minute, Miss——" he began.

"Haun," she said. "Agatha. My father and my uncle were brothers."

"Please stay right where you are," he said.

She drew herself up. He perceived that she had a notion that she ought to accompany him, and he guessed that she, too, had previsioned what they were going to find somewhere down the slope. She took a deep breath between her parted, red lips, and her head went up. In spite of the climb she had gone a little pale, but now her color returned swiftly. She seemed to be of two minds. She felt that she ought to go down there, and yet she was willing to permit him to act for her. Perhaps it had been a long time since anyone had acted for her. His offer might be a refreshing novelty to her.

"Well," she said at last, "whatever you think best."

"Don't stir," he said, and he hurried down the bare slope and plunged into the trees.

He had not taken a dozen steps among them when he came to what he had feared he would come to—a huddled figure, lying on its side, bent almost double, so that the knees almost touched the chin.

It was Haun, and all life was gone from him. More, all life had been brutally beaten out of him. He had been clubbed about the face and the head.

Clinton remembered that the man had been dragged over the ridge and down this side; and he pulled up one of the sleeves of Haun's coat to satisfy a notion which had struck him. Yes, there was a red welt on Haun's arm. Clinton opened his shirt and found another red mark on his chest.

"Somebody," said Clinton to himself, "roped him from the side of the road and dragged him all this way, after pulling him from his horse. Then before he could get to his feet, somebody beat him to death. Let's see."

Moving a little to one side, he stepped off five paces, fifteen or sixteen feet. Then he moved in so that he was directly beyond Haun's body. Someone had stood there. There were a number of footprints. He went slowly back toward the body and found further footprints in both directions. He could easily picture what had happened. Haun's assailant had dragged Haun this far. Then he had dropped the end of the rope which he had undoubtedly run over a shoulder and had sprung back on Haun. When Haun was dead, he had loosed the rope from about his body and had returned to the coiled end he had dropped. He had stood up there, fifteen or so feet away, and had coiled up the end of the rope, dragging it away from Haun.

"Where is Haun's saddle?" Clinton asked himself.

He hunted about among the trees but he could find no sign anywhere. He came to the conclusion that the saddle had not been brought up here. He did not consider the loss of it important. Such a trifle, he thought, could cut no figure in a shocking tragedy like this.

CLINTON was a cool, straight thinker, and he saw that he had two things to do immediately. He must get back to the girl and tell her what had happened, and then he must carry word to the sheriff. He knew that the town in which he had bought his horse was the county seat. He had ridden past the courthouse.

As he came out of the trees, he looked up. The girl was standing at the edge of the summit, looking down at him. He began to cast about in his mind how most gently he could break the news to her, but then he remembered the incident of his offer to bring a pail of water for her. He was sure now that she would have let him get the water if her uncle had not appeared suddenly in the doorway. There doubtless had been no love lost between her and her uncle. That would make his task easier.

As he came up below her, he lifted his head and they looked into each other's eyes. He saw that she was a girl of quick perception. The gravity in his face told her all she wanted to know.

"You found him," she said; and then she asked, "He is dead?"

"He is dead," Clinton said.

Her eyes clouded and then the lids dropped over them. She clenched and unclenched her hands twice.

"I'll take you home, Miss Haun," he said, "and then I'll ride into town and notify the sheriff. It's the only thing to do."

Her lids flew open and she stared down at him. He felt that somehow she had a wider view of the whole happening than he had. Thoughts were racing through her mind. It was as if shadows of them flew across her face.

"You'll have to wait," she stated. "You and I will have to talk this thing out fully. You don't seem to realize that you and my uncle rode up here together and that you rode back to our house alone. You went away on one horse and returned on another, the horse he had been riding. We will have to decide what we are going to tell the sheriff about all that."

"Why, ma'am," he said, "we will just tell the sheriff the truth. The truth never hurt anybody yet."

"You would have to convince the sheriff you were telling the truth," she said. "He is a hard man to convince. Evidently you have never met our sheriff."

"The story I will tell will be as straight as a string," he declared. "There won't be a flaw in it."

"You come with me," she ordered significantly.

She did not wait to take his hand now, but went rapidly down the slope toward the road they had left a while ago. He followed her. Their horses were still standing at the roadside.

She walked past them to the middle of the road and stood looking up and down.

"I don't believe anybody has gone by since we went up there," she said. "Nobody knows you stopped at our house—except me. Here is the horse you bought in the village. Mount him and ride on to wherever you were going. No one need ever know that you even saw my uncle. You can easily account for the time that has passed since you left town."

"In other words, ma'am," said Clinton gravely, "you are suggestin' that I run away from trouble. You think I am yella. You think I am a quitter. You want me to leave you alone to face this thing. I been thinkin' all along, ma'am, that you was a girl that figured things out fast, easy, and correct. It can't be that I am mistaken in that."

A sudden quiver of emotion fled across her lips. Then they were firm. She held them tightly for a moment and then she said, "All right. Come back to the house with me. There is a good deal you will have to be told."

They mounted their horses and turned toward the house.

CHAPTER IV

HAUN'S HATE

"MY UNCLE had a genius for hating people," said Agatha.

She and Clinton were seated in the kitchen of Haun's home—her home now, Clinton supposed. Agatha

had ridden bareheaded and the breeze which the ride had made had fluffed up her soft hair. It had whipped her color into her cheeks, and the color held there now steadily. Clinton thought she was —well, yes, beautiful, but not flashily so. It was a wholesome kind of beauty, sound, not the beauty of art but of health. It was not a surface thing. It was a part, he felt, of all she was.

"He was a mean man," Clinton suggested, as she paused.

"That isn't strong enough," she answered. "He was more than mean. He was brutal. He was selfish. He would do anything to gain his own ends. And he was avaricious. Oh!"

"He stung me in our horse trade," Clinton told her. "That pony was shortened up in front."

"Let me tell you about that," she said, "now that you mention it. That pony belonged to a puncher who has been working over beyond here. He stopped here one day when my uncle was at the lower end of the farm and I was alone. He came to the kitchen door asking for my uncle. When I told him my uncle wasn't at home, he walked right into the house. He is a mean man, too, Mr. Clinton. He threw his hat on the table and sprawled in a chair and looked at me. I told him he had better go. He just laughed. I was furious. There was a gun in a drawer of the table here and I got it and drove him off.

"*He* was furious. He is a thin man with thin, hard lips and almost black eyes. You should have seen the way he looked at me. I have never seen a face so twisted with rage as his was. He mumbled something as he left. I don't know what it was—a threat, I suppose.

"Next day I was working here in the kitchen again. It was morning and the sun was shining across the floor. Suddenly there was a shadow on the floor and on me. I looked up. That man stood in the doorway. He had a gun in a holster at his hip. I suppose he had prowled about the house and had thought I was alone. He didn't know that my uncle was in the stable.

"I told him he had better leave. He didn't say anything. He just came in and sat down at the table, throwing his hat on it as he had done before. He pulled the gun half way out of the holster and let it drop back.

"'I've come for you,' he said. 'I been watchin' you ever since you been here. I want you. I'm goin' to have you. I got two horses outside, one for you, one for me. I've quit my job, been paid off. Let's ride.'

"I was so astonished I could only stare at him. I thought he must be crazy. Really, his eyes were just like hot coals, Mr. Clinton. As I looked at him, an odor came to my nostrils. I knew what it was. He had been drinking some of the terrible whisky they sell around here. My uncle always has a bottle of whisky in the house. He drank very little of it, though; a quart would last him a long time. He claimed it was good stuff to have on hand for medicine. He got a bottle soon after we came here. He took one drink and the terrible odor went all through the room."

"White stuff," said Clinton. "Moonshine."

"Like water. Well, I told this man he had been drinking and that he had better leave. He only laughed. Then there was a step outside, and my uncle stood in the doorway. Of course I never cared anything about my uncle, but he had given me a home ever since I was a little girl, and I didn't want anything to happen to him. I cried to him to go back.

MY UNCLE was mean, brutal, avaricious, but he was not a coward. He wasn't afraid of men. I have seen him stand up to men bigger than himself. He came right on into the room. He was quick in an emergency, quick in his mind, and quick in his body stockily built though he was. I saw his eyes flash over this man, taking in his gun and insolent attitude. But my uncle smiled and waved his hand as if there wasn't anything unusual in the man's being there.

"'Howdy, stranger,' he said, 'you ridin' 'em double today?'

"The man leaned against the table. I had a fire in the stove, for I was getting ready to bake, and I think the heat must have made him drunker than he was when he came in. He threw his left arm across the corner of the table and kept his right near the butt of the gun.

"'Neighbor,' he said, 'I ain't a-ridin' 'em double. That extra horse you see out there I brought for a purpose, a very special purpose.'

"He stopped and laughed thickly, and

a vacant look came into his face. My uncle laughed, too, and the man should have known from that laugh that my uncle was furious; but the man seemed to have just that one idea in his mind. I don't think he was very bright.

" 'Oh, you've brought that extra horse as a present for my niece, have you?' my uncle asked.

" 'That's it,' the man said. 'Present for the little girl. She has taken my eye.'

" 'Trouble with some of you punchers is that you are Indian givers,' my uncle said. 'You make a girl a present and then you take it back.'

"The man straightened up in his chair, his eyes gleaming.

" 'Easy, stranger, easy,' he said. 'When Joe Dodge gives a thing he gives it without any reservation. That horse belongs to the lady from now on. Present from Joe Dodge.'

" 'I don't want your horse,' I told him. 'You have no right to give me anything.'

" 'Can the lady accept the horse, stranger?' he asked my uncle.

" 'You better think so,' my uncle said. 'The horse is hers right now.'

" 'Shake on it,' the man said, and he got to his feet, a little unsteadily.

"He put out his hand and my uncle took it. The man looked at me, his eyes wild and hot.

" 'When I want a thing I go after it,' he said. 'You get ready to ride with me.'

"His hand was still in my uncle's hand. My uncle was a tremendously strong man. I saw him suddenly brace himself and pull on Dodge's hand. Dodge was carried off his balance and my uncle flung him along the floor. His head struck the door jamb and he lay still. My uncle gave me a grin of triumph. He—he had always boasted that he would pick a husband for me, and that it wouldn't be any cowpuncher.

"Dodge lay still on the floor, and my uncle went to him and took his gun from him. Then he stood back till Dodge stirred. He ordered Dodge to get up and Dodge staggered to his feet. His head had been cut, and there was a little stain of blood on his cheek. I never have seen rage grip a man as it gripped him, Mr. Clinton. It seemed to sear him, burn him. He began to curse in a low voice.

"My uncle threw the gun on him and drove him from the house. I followed them outside. The man mounted his horse and caught up the rein of the horse he had brought for me.

" 'Drop it,' my uncle ordered.

"The man obeyed. My uncle made him get off the big roan he was seated on, and mount the pony. Then my uncle mounted the roan and drove the man ahead of him. When he came home, he told me he had ridden over to the place where the man had been employed, and found his boss. He told him just what had occurred. At least he said he told him just what had occurred, but I suppose he made the story stronger than it was. I forgot to say that this was on a Sunday—I was getting ready to bake pies for Sunday dinner—and over at the ranch there were a number of men about the bunkhouse. When they heard the story they were for stringing that puncher up. It seemed he had been a silent, morose fellow and nobody had liked him. The boss wouldn't stand for that, though, of course, and so the men fell on the puncher and kicked him out of the yard after they had pulled him off his horse. He was pretty badly beaten up, and of course humiliated. My uncle came safely home on the pony. It seemed that the puncher had won the pony from another man in a dice game at the ranch. He didn't know he would go lame. They said the pony could travel quite a way before his injury affected him."

"That's a bad luck pony," Clinton said.

"He seems to be," she asserted.

"What became of the puncher? I'd have thought he would lay for your uncle when your uncle was coming home."

"Uncle said he was in town, not the county seat, but a little village over to the southwest. Reports came back that he was drinking hard and gambling, winning, too. My uncle wore a gun for a while, but when nothing happened, he put it aside."

"Have you got that gun?" Clinton asked.

"It's in the other room."

"Would you lend it to me? I'll use it only if I have to. If there is a wild man running loose, I ought to be armed. We ought to round up that puncher right away."

SHE started to speak, but did not at the moment. She went into the other room and came back with a gun belt and a big gun in a holster. Clinton accepted the belt. He did not put it on at once, but let it lie in his lap.

"Seems to me, ma'am," he said, "that the thing for me to do is to ride over to that village and find this fella. It's your idea that he killed your uncle, ain't it?"

She was looking away from him, through the window, and was in the grip of some kind of struggle, he saw. She was pale now and her lips trembled.

Slowly she turned her head and looked into his eyes. "No," she said, "he didn't kill my uncle."

"He was just the kind of fella that would do it. Him drinkin' and gamblin' and nursin' his wrongs—your uncle knockin' him out and them boys bootin' him off the ranch. Why, ma'am, I have seen murder done for a lot less than that. If that fella wasn't crazy when he come here with his wild threat to you, he would be crazy soon after. Prob'ly he was crazy all the time."

"But he didn't kill my uncle," she reiterated in a voice a little above a whisper. "There was somebody else, somebody with a much more real reason for killing him."

Clinton looked at her, then glanced out through the open door. "And somebody you think a good deal of," he told himself. Aloud he said, "You can trust me, ma'am. This thing has got to be straightened out. Mebbe we will have to make up a story. I ain't strong on that kind of thing, but—well, I'll tell you; you have stood enough. We have got to make sure that nothin' touches you in this matter."

The girl sank into a chair. "Thank you," she said. "In a moment I'll tell you. I'll tell you the exact truth."

CHAPTER V

HAUN, TRICKSTER

LET me give you a word about myself and how I happen to be here," she said. "My father died when I was ten years old. My mother had died the year before. My father had a good ranch in Wyoming. He was well to do. Whenever my uncle came into contact with a man that had money, he was pleasant to that man, making friends with him. My father was a simple and a just man, and my uncle always kept on the good side of him. He fooled my father. He fooled my mother. He fooled me.

"When my father died, it was found that my uncle was his administrator. He took over my father's property and disposed of it. He told me that I would get everything my father had, in the end; that is, the money for the property; but he explained that there couldn't be a settlement till I was of age. I believed him. I didn't know anything about such things. So I kept on making my home with him. He gave me a little money, but not so much as he would have had to give a woman who worked for him as I did. I was of age last month and I asked him for an accounting. He only laughed. I knew then. I was going to see a lawyer soon—but so many things happened.

"A year ago last fall my uncle suddenly came home with another man. He said this man had bought an interest in the ranch. They were going to be pardners. My uncle's place was isolated, and I saw few people. I was so glad to have someone beside my uncle in the house that it never occurred to me that my uncle would cheat this young man. My suspicions were not yet roused.

"Let me tell you about this newcomer. I don't want you to make any mistake about him. He was a good man, very different from my uncle. He had worked in a great many places, but I don't want you to get the idea that he was just a drifter and a waster. He had been in Oklahoma, his home, Wyoming, Montana, the Dakotas, and for a while in Texas, down near the border. A few months before he met my uncle, he had come into a considerable sum of money. His father had left some property around Tulsa, Oklahoma, and oil had been struck on it. There were several heirs and they wanted to sell. The young man agreed. In the end he got about fifteen thousand dollars. He paid all that to my uncle for a fractional share in my uncle's ranch."

"He protected himself, did he?"

"You'll see. He——"

"Excuse me," said Clinton. "Mebbe I have met this young fella. I have been around some myself. What was his name?"

"Siddons—Ralph Siddons."

"Name isn't familiar," said Clinton. "What for lookin' fella?"

"Slender. Just a little taller than I am. Black hair and blue eyes, such blue eyes; they always made me think of the eyes of a child, they were so clear and kind and quiet. I don't mean that he didn't have spirit. He had plenty of that, as you shall see. He had a temper, too, but not a mean temper. It was buried deep, not easily roused. He loved the cattle business, the ranch, the hills, the plains, everything. We would sit outdoors in the summer and he would talk. He had such a different way of looking at things."

She paused and looked down at her capable hands, folded in her lap. Her face was very quiet now, a little sad. Clinton jumped to a conclusion. He could paint a mental picture of her and that charming young fella. He had met up with men like that, dreamers, men who had thoughts that they didn't share, men a little withdrawn from their fellows, men who could ride with others for fifty miles and say no word, men coming out of faraway thinking with slow smiles on their lips. Good men in their way, too.

His conclusion was that Agatha loved this young man. They had been on the ranch there together, two young people. As she said, Siddons was different. She had known few men except her uncle. No wonder Siddons had stirred her with his stories, stories doubtless told in a low voice and without boasting on his part. He could see Siddons lift his head, turn it, fix his clear, blue eyes on the girl's face, smile his slow, disarming smile.

And loving Siddons, Agatha now knew that he was in danger. He was in desperate need of help. For unquestionably he was the man that had killed Haun. That was what the girl was coming to. She had said there was somebody else; Siddons was the somebody else.

Well, Clinton asked, how about himself? She was a beautiful girl. How did she appeal to himself? He knew. He knew what had happened to him when he had advanced to her to get the pail of water for her. He had not even guessed at the time, but now he knew. Well, anything like that was useless. Bury it. Bury it deep. It was buried. There!

HE STIRRED in his chair, shrugged himself, shook his head. He looked through the open door again. He would not look at her. He would presently have to erase the picture of her from his mind.

"Last fall came," the girl went on suddenly. "I noticed that my uncle and Siddons were talking together a good deal, trying to settle something between themselves. Once they were out by the stable. My uncle, I could tell from his actions, was beginning to lose his temper. I believe he found Siddons more stubborn than he had thought. I walked down toward them with the stable between them and me.

"'Well, all right,' Siddons said. 'Do as you like. Then pay me my fifteen thousand with a fair profit, a profit that will at least equal wages, and I will drag out.'

"'Good enough,' my uncle said.

"It came to this. My uncle had seventeen hundred head of cattle. The ranch was worth about seventy-five thousand dollars. Siddons had a fifteen thousand dollar equity in it all, or was supposed to have. My uncle got help, and all the cattle were rounded up. Siddons remained at the ranch while the cattle were taken away in my uncle's charge. They were taken away in half a dozen lots and Siddons was supposed to be there to check them. When the last lot was to go, my uncle came to me. He said that we would have a settlement. He said it was time. So I went with him, leaving Siddons alone on the ranch. Next day, as I later learned, a man to whom my uncle had sold the ranch came and took charge of it. Siddons had no interest in the ranch or in the cattle that my uncle had sold. He had his horse and no more. My uncle had sold the cattle and then the ranch. He had given a deed to this new man. We came on here, my uncle never mentioning a settlement. And here we have been for eight months."

She fell silent. Clinton felt her eyes on him. Still he looked through the open door.

"I reckon, ma'am, that you suspected what was going on," he said. "You came on here with your uncle so that you could keep him under your eye. You weren't worried about your own settlement. You were thinking of Siddons."

"Thank you," she said. "That was it

exactly. I was practically a prisoner in this house for seven months. My uncle changed his tactics. He said I had no money coming to me; the best I could do was to forget it. I accused him of having defrauded Siddons. He laughed. He said that Siddons hadn't a scrap of paper to show that he had any interest in anything or that he had ever paid my uncle a penny. I learned afterward that they had made a sort of provisional deal. Siddons had paid over his money with the understanding that he could have it back and withdraw at any time in six months. If he liked, at the end of six months the transaction would be made legal. The money was put in a bank in town and Siddons supposed it was going to remain there."

"He had no business head, this Siddons."

"None," she said. Clinton felt an uneasiness in her. "It was partly my fault," she declared. "My uncle and Siddons had made no deal that Siddons couldn't have withdrawn from when Siddons first came to the ranch. When he first saw me, he—he—well, he just seemed to decide to stay. He let my uncle handle things. He let matters drift."

THAT fitted in very well with Clinton's former notion. He could see these two handsome young people meeting at the lonely ranch-house. They had looked into each other's eyes and nothing else had seemed to matter. While Clinton and the girl had sat there, the sun had sunk far into the west. The sunlight had crept across the floor and up the far wall. Evening was not far off.

"We'd better get on, ma'am," Clinton said. "Something has got to be done soon. We can't wait too long before we let the sheriff know."

"At length my uncle's watch of me relaxed," she went on swiftly. "I was able to mail a letter to Siddons. I had been waiting for only that chance. Siddons came on here some time ago. He walked in on my uncle while we were eating supper. He was wearing a gun and he threw it on my uncle. He said he had come for a settlement.

"You saw, Mr. Clinton, how my uncle treated that crazy puncher. He treated Siddons that way, too. He agreed to everything Siddons said. He said Siddons had him foul and there was no way out. That was all Siddons wanted. He turned to me to apologize for having come where I was with a gun on him. My uncle rose as if to get a drink of water. The rolling pin was on the table there. He seized it, whirled and struck Siddons a terrible blow on the right arm. Then he knocked him down and took up the dropped gun."

She paused and now Clinton had to look at her. She was twisting her hands in her lap, and in the light which had begun to fade, her face was very pale. Her eyes had a bright, unnatural look.

"Did your uncle succeed in runnin' Siddons off the place, that young fella?" Clinton asked.

"I will have to tell you about that," she said. "It is so terrible that I hoped I could keep it back, but I see I can't. This—this Dodge—he was a gunman my uncle had hired. My uncle had thought Siddons might get track of him and that there would have to be a killing Dodge screamed that, when he and my uncle had their fight. When my uncle had beaten Siddons he made him get on his horse. He took him by the old road to a lonely spot and tied him there. Then he went and got Dodge. Dodge had two guns. Siddons had none. My uncle told Dodge to drive Siddons out of the country and to kill him if he came back. You see, he had misjudged Siddons. He thought fear of death would keep Siddons away, but it only made Siddons more determined. I knew he would return.

"Well, Dodge took Siddons into the next county and turned him loose. He said he would blow Siddons apart if ever Siddons showed his face in this part of the country again. When my uncle came back, he stayed about the house. He was waiting for Dodge. He must have known that Dodge was—was—well, crazy about me, as they say. You know what happened when Dodge came with the two horses. My uncle was not afraid of him. My uncle had been a gunman himself in his youth. He thought he knew just how to deal with a man like Dodge. After he had driven Dodge off all he did was to watch through the day and lock the doors at night. That gave me my chance to watch at night, for my uncle was a sound sleeper. I was waiting down by the road when Siddons came up afoot one night.

"He was strange, and no wonder. He had been defrauded. He had been beaten. He had been run off by a hired gunman. And he was proud! He told me he had come to kill my uncle. I tried to make him promise not to do it, but he only stood out there in the road, bareheaded, looking at me. I was in the midst of a plea to him when he suddenly turned and left me. He went perhaps fifty feet and then he turned back.

"'I'll kill him, Agatha,' he said. 'There ain't room enough in this world for him. He beat me. He struck me down. I will beat him. I will beat him to death.'

"Then he was gone."

"And your uncle was beaten to death," Clinton said.

"Siddons killed him," she said. "There isn't any question about that. Now, what can we do for Siddons? What can we do to make sure he gets away?"

Yes, that was what it all came to. That was all she was thinking about now. She loved Siddons, murderer though he was. She wanted to screen him, to help him. Of the law Clinton knew practically nothing. He had never been entangled with the law. If he thought anything about it, he thought that a hard pressed man might be justified sometimes in taking the law into his own hands. Certainly Siddons had been hard pressed. However, nothing of that mattered. What mattered was what Agatha wanted. If she wanted Siddons saved, Clinton would save him if he could. Let her decide. Let him act! Very simple, that, the very thing that any man would do in a case like this.

And yet——

"Why, ma'am," he said, "Siddons is prob'ly far way by now. Nobody would suspect him."

"Siddons isn't the kind of man who would run away," she said. "He was in the village last night. My uncle saw him there. Siddons just stood and looked at him. My uncle was beginning to plan what he should do about him. There are two guns in the other room, ready for action."

"You mean, that Siddons is in the county seat? And this fella Dodge? He is over in the other village?"

"Yes."

"Tell me the quickest and easiest way to get from the county seat to that village where Dodge is," Clinton said.

She told him, in detail.

He rose. "I'll be ridin'," he said.

"You must have some food."

"You throw a coupla sandwiches together for me, ma'am. I will eat 'em on the way. I have no time to lose."

In ten minutes he was riding hard through the gathering dusk, toward the county seat.

Chapter VI

SIDDONS

WHEN he came to the first of the buildings at the county seat, Clinton drew rein in the shadows at the roadside and considered what his first step should be. He decided that he must see Siddons at once. He must give Siddons his chance to make a getaway. Agatha had said that he was not the kind of man who would run away, but Clinton thought he could be persuaded to leave town.

Clinton knew that he must not be seen. The sheriff must not learn that he had talked to Siddons before notifying that official that Haun had been killed. The sheriff might be sharp, and he might get a two-and-two out of a talk between Clinton and Siddons. Also the sheriff's suspicions would be roused by the fact that Clinton had not come to him immediately.

He had got a good description of Siddons from the girl, and thought he would be able to pick him out. A stranger in a small town usually could be singled out from the natives. There was always something about a stranger, his way of addressing the natives, the way he carried himself.

So Clinton now rode back a little way and tied his horse to a tree. Then he went forward on foot. He came to a row of stores presently. The first of these proved to be a pool hall. A good deal of loafing was done in such places, and there were always card or pool games going on. A man with time to kill might waste it there. Clinton entered.

As he was buying a package of cigarettes, his eyes swept the room. He saw no one who, he thought, might be Siddons. He thought of the sheriff, and his eyes swept the room again. He saw no one who might be taken for the sheriff. He had a sudden hunch then. "Seen the

sheriff tonight?" he asked the man who had waited on him.

"Barker?" the man asked. "Naw. Ain't seen 'im for a week."

Another hunch came to Clinton. He asked permission to use the telephone. He got an immediate answer from the sheriff's office, and he asked if the sheriff were there. Luck favored him. The man who answered said the officer was about town somewhere and would be back in an hour or so. Clinton asked the man to tell the sheriff that a fella by the name of Clinton was looking for him. The man merely said "all right." He did not ask if there was anything he could do.

Believing that he now had a full explanation to offer the sheriff for any delay there was in getting a report of Haun's death, Clinton returned to his horse and rode openly into town. He went along the main street till he came to a hotel. He rode past the building and then came back to the corner of the porch. He had seen that there was only a big, hanging oil lamp in the lobby, and this made merely a splash of light in front of the window. Darkness lay heavily at this corner of the porch.

Clinton dismounted and stood back from the window. There was only one man in the lobby. He was sitting directly under the lamp, reading a magazine. He answered fairly well the description of Siddons.

Clinton walked rapidly to the door, threw it open, and stepped inside, his eyes on the man under the lamp. He wanted to see how the man would take the sudden arrival of a stranger. The man looked up quickly. His face, Clinton saw, was thinner than should be in a man who otherwise seemed to be in good health. In that thin face the eyes were large, and Clinton thought he found in them that clear quality which Agatha had spoken of as being in Siddons' eyes.

He walked swiftly up to the man and stood before him. The man's eyes did not leave Clinton's face. Clinton wanted to get him outside before anyone came, if he were Siddons.

"I've come from Miss Haun," he said.

"I'm Siddons," the man said; he rose to his feet with a quick, alert movement.

They went out on the porch and moved into the shadow.

"Where's your horse?" Clinton asked.

"In the stable behind the hotel."

"You ready to ride?"

"Any time. I been payin' my bill here day by day in advance. I'm paid for tonight."

"Ready to blow, were you?" Clinton asked.

"I come and go as I please," Siddons stated.

"Here's a message from Miss Haun—get on your horse and blow out of the country as fast as you can go."

"I don't know you, fella," Siddons said. "I don't even know that you have ever met Miss Haun."

"Haun was murdered today," Clinton told him.

If he had expected Siddons to show any agitation, he was mistaken. He could not see the man's face plainly, but he thought it had gone blank. There was an effect of blankness all through the man. He seemed a little limp all of a sudden, and Clinton thought, in surprise, that he was merely astonished. Perhaps, however, he was only pretending astonishment. Clinton did not speak again. He wanted to see what Siddons would say at last without any prompting from him.

"Who killed him?" Siddons did ask.

"There ain't time to go into the details," Clinton retorted. "I've got to get over to the sheriff's office and make a report."

"And Miss Haun wants me to blow out of the country, eh?"

"That was the tip she sent to you."

Young Siddons seemed to consider this. He bent his head and appeared to be plunged in thought. "You have known Miss Haun for any length of time?" he asked presently.

"Very short time."

"She ain't the kind of girl to send a man a tip like that unless she had good reason for it, now, is she?" Siddons queried.

"She ain't."

Siddons lifted his head and expelled his breath slowly. "Well," he said, "I reckon I better be on my way. What's your name, if we should meet again? I owe you somethin' for ridin' in here to warn me."

"You don't owe me a thing," said Clinton. "Clinton's my name."

"I may see you some time," Siddons said. "S'long, I'm driftin' out into the dark."

He moved noiselessly past Clinton, stepped down from the porch, and was gone around the corner of the hotel. Clinton waited till he rode out into the street. He walked his horse for a little way and then struck him into a gallop. The sound of the beating hoofs died out presently.

CLINTON took out the package of ready made cigarettes which he had bought and lighted one. He didn't think so very much of Mr. Siddons. Siddons had got word from an unprotected girl that he was in danger, and he had promptly disappeared. That, to Clinton, proved that he was guilty and that he was afraid to remain here and face whatever there was to face. The girl had wanted him to go, but still she doubtless would be made unhappy by his going so promptly. Clinton decided that he would have to soften his report of that. He would have to say that he had had to argue with Siddons.

He swung from the porch to his saddle and trotted down the street. When he came to the building which housed the county offices, he dismounted and went toward a door in the basement where an oblong of glass showed a light. When he came to the door, he found that he had guessed correctly, and that this was the sheriff's office.

As he opened the door and stepped inside, a man who had been seated at the desk with his feet on it and his hat pulled over his eyes looked up and pulled down his feet.

"Sheriff here?" Clinton asked briskly.

"Be here in a minute or two," the man answered. "Have a seat. Anythin' bustin' loose anywhere?"

"I phoned a while ago," Clinton said. "I wanted to see the sheriff."

"Clinton, eh? Well, the sheriff will be here in a minute or two now."

The sheriff arrived in five minutes. He swung open the door and strode into the room with an air of authority. He was a big man with a heavy red face beneath a broad brimmed black hat. He swept Clinton with a pair of bright, dark eyes.

"Waitin' for me?" he asked.

Clinton hadn't taken much of a fancy to the sheriff. He didn't think much of men who took on as big a surplus of fat as the sheriff had taken on. Besides the sheriff was chewing a toothpick. He made Clinton think of too much food. Too much food, in the puncher's estimation, was almost as bad as not enough.

"I haven't been waitin' long," Clinton said; and then as he always did when he did not fancy a man he shot his bolt, "Man named Haun out here a way was murdered today."

Clinton had to confess that while the sheriff's body might be fat his brain was not. He did not start. He did not exclaim. He poured out no volley of questions. After his eyes had bored into Clinton's for a moment, he went to a peg on the wall and took down a gun belt with guns in two holsters.

"Pat," he said, "call Dobson. Tell him I'm ridin' into the country. Have him round up that fella Siddons that has been hangin' around town for a while. Haun was tellin' me the other day that he had had a run-in with that fella. Tell Dobson to get him right. Haun said he was a gunman."

He wheeled about to Clinton while the deputy called a number on the telephone. "How'd you know about this?" he demanded.

"I was ridin' through that country today," Clinton answered. "Miss Haun sent me."

"I didn't ask you who sent you," the sheriff said. "I asked you how you knew Haun had been murdered."

"I found the body," Clinton answered.

"Oh, you did, eh?"

He whipped out a gun and held it angling toward the floor. The deputy had finished telephoning. "Pat," the sheriff said briskly, "go around behind this man and see what he has got on him."

Pat sidled past the sheriff and Clinton and came up behind Clinton. He removed the gun which Agatha had given him.

"Uh, huh," said the sheriff. "You keep that, Pat. It may be a very valuable gun. Now, cowboy, what's your name?"

"Clinton."

"Where you from?"

"Various places."

The sheriff did not press him for a definite answer. The sheriff seemed to think that a little indefiniteness on Clinton's part might be something to point to later on.

"Your horse out front?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Where'd you get him?" he asked next.

"Bought him right here in this man's town," Clinton answered.

"Where's your bill of sale?"

Clinton started. He could not help himself. He remembered that instead of having a bill of sale for this horse, he had one for the horse Haun had traded to him. And that bill of sale might very easily be a forgery. It did not seem likely now that Haun had got a bill from Dodge.

The sheriff was looking at him intently. Clinton began to go through his pockets. He didn't want the sheriff to search him. Of course he could prove his purchase of the horse, but this sheriff was a man from whose mind first impressions were not easily erased.

"Don't know what I did with it," said Clinton.

"Who'd you buy the horse from?" the sheriff demanded.

"I bought it in the stable over on the next street. You can call up."

The sheriff directed the deputy to call up the stable and ask about the purchase of the horse. The deputy presently reported that Clinton had bought it. Clinton had no feeling of relief from the report. He knew that it now would have no effect on the sheriff's suspicions.

The sheriff had been looking down at the deputy. While he considered what the deputy had said, he kept his eyes absently on the deputy's face. Clinton took from his pocket the paper which Haun had given him, rolled it into a ball, removed his hat, and pushed the ball inside the sweatband.

"Well, come on, you," the sheriff, rousing himself, ordered.

In the street they found the sheriff's horse beyond Clinton's.

"Now, just a minute, Sheriff," Clinton said. "I haven't time to go with you. I got some business some place else."

"I wouldn't wonder," the sheriff grated. "Lope in ahead of me, fella, and ride. Burn the road. I'm in a hurry. Minutes are precious in a case like this."

Clinton's jaw clamped and his eyes blazed. Then he relaxed and let the fire in his eyes die. Just this minute there was no chance of his getting away to ride to the village where Dodge was. He would have to wait for the chance or make it if he could.

So he rode ahead of the sheriff.

As he rode, a plan which had been dimly in his mind came forth there clearly. He had been thinking about Dodge. Dodge undoubtedly was a tough nut. Somehow Clinton had been going to use him to divert suspicion from Siddons, if there should be such suspicion. That such suspicion existed, in a general way in the sheriff's mind, was indicated by his having ordered Siddons picked up. Well, he wouldn't get Siddons if Siddons had put spurs to his horse.

This fella Dodge now? Wasn't Dodge crazy? Most gunmen—killers—were. He had seen the lust to slay blazing in the eyes of one or two men in times past. Such men ought to be locked up. Clinton had always felt that. Well, then, if Dodge was a plain killer, he ought to be locked up. If he was convicted of killing Haun, he would be sent to an asylum. The law recognized the irresponsibility of insane men. It protected them—and society, too.

All this, of course, with reservations. If Dodge were not insane Clinton would have to help him get free. At the least he could be used to draw a herring across the trail till Siddons should have made his getaway. Time and the confusing of the sheriff would be his aids just now, Clinton saw.

The thing to do was to find Dodge and to discover whether he was insane. If he was, the whole story of his relations with Haun and his fight with him could be disclosed.

No, Clinton defended himself, he was not trying to frame an innocent man. He was, first, just going to see what was what about Dodge. Then he would decide. It was all for the girl. She loved Siddons. Siddons undoubtedly loved her, though he had shown himself to be a weak sister by fleeing in the night. Mebbe when the girl found out about that flight, she wouldn't think so much of Siddons. Just mebbe! And Clinton himself—naw, he didn't love Agatha. He didn't love anybody. What was the use? Far better to ride and roam atop a good horse. Far better!

Well, how was he going to get away from this doggoned sheriff? That was the main thing just now.

Chapter VII

OUT OF THE DARK

WHEN they arrived at the farmhouse, the sheriff slipped down from his horse in the road and made Clinton do likewise. "Take your horse up the sod and lead him careful," the sheriff ordered. "I'll be right behind you. Don't make any noise."

"'Fraid of a girl alone in a farmhouse, are you, Sheriff?" Clinton jeered.

"You haven't seen me afraid of anything yet, have you?" the sheriff retorted. "I wasn't afraid of you, and, in your own mind, you are considerable of a man to be afraid of. When you get up there by the house, drag your reins, fella, and keep your mouth shut. I am one of those peculiar sheriffs that don't rush into anything blind."

Clinton moved slowly toward the house, leading his horse, and the sheriff followed him. Clinton told himself that his mind was wide open. He meant that he was alert to seize any opportunity that happened along. He hoped there would be a chance for him to elude Barker on the way to the house. He was ready for any chance. He would throw himself on the sheriff and try to overcome him if he caught the official off his guard for two seconds.

But the big man gave him no chance. He followed close behind Clinton, and when Clinton turned his head the sheriff's gun came up and the sheriff warned him not to try anything.

When they were opposite the kitchen window, Barker called a halt. He looked across his saddle at the window, and Clinton looked there, too. At first they could see no one within the room. After a while, however, the girl came up to the window and stood looking out into the night. Darkness lay heavily over the yard and Clinton knew that Agatha could not see the men or the horses. Indeed she did not seem to be looking for anyone or anything. She pressed her forehead against the glass and her gaze seemed to be directed downward.

"Reckon she's alone," the sheriff said. "Drag your reins and step out ahead of me."

Clinton could only obey. The sheriff stuck his gun into the small of Clinton's back and prodded him up to the door.

"Miss Haun," the officer called.

The girl opened the door almost at once. The light flowed out on Clinton, revealing him plainly, but he was not sure that the girl would see Barker. She was looking directly into Clinton's eyes, a question in her own eyes.

"I brought company with me, ma'am," Clinton said promptly.

The sheriff's gun was pressed deep into Clinton's back, and the sheriff uttered an angry exclamation.

"When I want you to speak, I'll let you know," he said. "You had to tip her off to the fact that I was here, didn't you? You were afraid she would say something."

"I expected," said Clinton, "that she would say good evening. Ain't that what you would have said, ma'am?"

"Is it the sheriff?" she asked, a faint smile touching her lips.

"It's the sheriff and he is holdin' me up."

"Come in," she invited, stepping back from the door.

Closely followed by Barker, Clinton stepped into the room. The girl sat down and motioned to chairs for them.

"You sit over there against the wall," the sheriff directed Clinton. "Now, ma'am, will you tell me about the killin' of your uncle?"

Agatha shot a glance at Clinton.

"Never mind about him," Barker ordered. "What he has told me makes no difference."

"I only told him your uncle had been killed, ma'am," Clinton said.

"You shut your mouth," the sheriff exploded. "You hear me? Another word from you and I will blow you apart."

"That's silly, Barker," Clinton retorted angrily. "You ain't going to blow me apart."

"Well, you keep still."

"I won't. I'm going to advise Miss Haun if I can. She's all alone and I won't have you browbeating her."

"Who's browbeating her?"

"Tell him everything, Miss Haun," Clinton said. "There is nothing to hide."

The girl sat plunged in thought for a space. Clinton believed that she was considering him. Even while she was so keen to make sure that nothing happened to Siddons, she could give a thought to himself, Clinton saw. She was a square shooter all right.

She told her story, gave the sheriff all the details of the horse trading, the later following of the trail, and the finding of the body. She omitted mention of the fact that Clinton and Haun had ridden down the road together, so that Clinton might try out the pony.

BARKER sat looking at the girl for a moment. Clinton observed him closely. Barker had put his gun on the table, close to a hand that rested there. Clinton wondered if he might spring and grapple with the sheriff. He believed he could put that fat man out. However, he saw that Barker was keeping watch of him out of the tail of his eye. He would know the instant Clinton moved, and he could bring his gun into play before Clinton could reach him. Clinton saw that he would have to keep on waiting. He was determined to get away from Barker, but he might have a better opportunity. If he had to make a desperate play, take a hair trigger chance, he could do it later as well as now.

"Uh, huh," said the sheriff. "Well, I'm askin' you, ma'am, how this fella Clinton come to start a hunt for the body in the first place. You say he came back here and told you he was afraid your uncle had met with an accident. That sounds kind of silly to me. 'Cordin' to your story he was headed some place to look for a job. Why didn't he keep right on goin'? How did Haun have time to leave here after he did and get murdered up the road some place? Ain't it a fact that them two men left here together?"

Well, the sheriff had a pretty fair head on him, fat though it was, Clinton had to concede. He had put his pudgy finger right on the important thing. Somewhat vain, somewhat overbearing, still he was a pretty fair sort of a sheriff, Clinton reckoned.

Clinton had seen that that was a hole in the girl's story. She was straightforward. She wasn't used to making believe, not used to hiding things. If she tried to evade the sheriff now, his suspicion might fall on her. He might hold her as an accessory. Clinton had heard of such things. At any cost she had to be protected.

"I'll tell you about that," Clinton said. "Miss Haun forgot to mention it."

"She will mention it now," the sheriff declared. "You are going to have a chance to tell your story later on."

"Tell him about my ridin' off with your uncle, Miss Haun," Clinton said.

"I'll tell you something else, Mr. Barker," Agatha declared. "This man is not mixed up in this thing at all. He is an utter stranger to me. I never saw him in my life before this afternoon. You let him go and I will tell you all about his being here and how we found my uncle's body."

"Let him go?" said Barker. "Why, I'm goin' to hold him for your uncle's murder, Miss Haun."

"In that case you'll get nothing more out of me," the girl retorted.

"I think he had better have the story now, Miss Haun," Clinton said. "I have nothing to conceal. It won't look right, later on, if we seem to be hiding something."

She fixed her bright eyes on Clinton's face; her color wavered in her cheeks. "I don't want you to have to face anything on my account," she said.

"Well, let's keep the record straight."

There was so much honesty in her eyes, they were so steady and kind, that Clinton looked away from her. He was afraid that something of his feeling for her, though he had denied that such a feeling existed, would show in his own eyes. He did not want to reveal anything to her. He knew she was sensitive; regret would come to her easily. When he had gone, she must feel no regret.

His glance went to the door. He was almost facing it. Barker sat with his side to it, but now he was looking at Clinton, so that his eyes were turned fully away from it.

Clinton started. To cover that he moved in his chair and settled himself anew. His eyes went to Barker's face. The sheriff had apparently not noticed the start. If he had, he did not betray himself. Clinton's respect for the sheriff grew. He saw that Barker was in fact no numbskull.

Clinton began to tell his story. He was aware that he was talking almost mechanically. He was using only a little patch of his mind to keep the story straight. The rest of his mind was concerned with what he had noticed beyond the open door. Something had moved out there. It had been only a faint stir in the darkness, and then there had been

but the darkness itself. Clinton was sure that someone had moved from one side of the door to the other, keeping out of the path of light from the lamp. Now that person was probably creeping up to the door. An armed man might appear in the doorway at any moment. That man might be Dodge. Clinton could think of no one else. If it were Dodge, what would Dodge do?

It was difficult for Clinton to talk of one thing and think of another at the same time. He began to make heavy weather of his tale.

"Yes, you told me that before," Barker said, at one point. "Go on. Make it snappy. You and the girl are on top of the ridge now."

CLINTON labored on. If that man out there was Dodge would Dodge attack the sheriff first? If he did, would Clinton have a chance to overpower Dodge? Even so, the sheriff could get his gun into play and make Dodge a prisoner. Clinton wanted a first chance at the crazy puncher. He wanted to talk to him, to discover what his mental state really was.

Yet he didn't see how he could do anything. That man out there might be a friend of the girl's. Certainly she must have more admirers than the unbalanced Dodge and Siddons. Maybe some friendly puncher, cattleman, or farmer had ridden into the yard and had seen the sheriff with his gun on the table. Such a man would come silently up to the door to listen. What play he made would depend upon whether he thought the girl needed help or not.

Well, Clinton didn't see that he could do anything but let the situation develop. He came to the finding of Haun's body and that seemed to be about all that he had to disclose to the sheriff.

For a space, as he finished, the sheriff sat staring at him. Then his hand went out to his gun and clasped the butt of it. He got to his feet. His eyes were stern and accusing. Clinton knew that the man outside, Dodge or some friend of Agatha's, would act now if he were going to act at all. He wanted to look once at the doorway, beyond which lay the heavy dark, but he controlled himself. It occurred to him that if he looked, displaying interest, the sheriff's own glance might go there and he would have the chance to leap which he had been contemplating. He knew, however, that if he and the sheriff grappled, it would result in a mighty struggle, for the sheriff was no weakling. While they wrestled, they would both be at the mercy of the other man.

"All I can say now is that your story don't sound good to me, Clinton," the sheriff stated. "I will have to take you with me and hold you. You heard me give an order that that fella Siddons was to be picked up. Seems to me this matter lies between you and Siddons. Siddons and Haun had trouble, and Haun stung you with a lame horse. You will both have to do some explainin' before you get your liberty. The explainin' won't be to me, either."

"Mr. Barker—" Agatha began, and then she stopped.

The sheriff had moved toward Clinton. Clinton had come fully around so that he faced the door.

A man had appeared in the doorway. He had a gun in his hand and he leveled it at the sheriff.

"Don't move, Barker," he said in a low, voice. "I have got you covered. I will have to stick a bullet into you if you start anything. Drop your gun on the floor and stand back from it."

The sheriff hesitated for no more than two beats of his heart. In that brief space he seemed to consider. Clinton knew that he would drop his gun. There had been something menacing in the edged voice which had given the commands. It was the voice of a man who was indulging in no idle threats.

The sheriff's gun went to the floor and he stepped back. He did not turn to confront the man who was holding him up. Respect for the stranger, whoever he was, seemed to have been bred in him. That did not prevent his anger from rising. His voice was thick with it when he spoke. "Who are you?"

"You named me a minute ago. You said somebody was goin' to pick me up. It won't be necessary. Here I am. I'm Siddons."

CHAPTER VIII

DEPARTURE

"I HAVE no gun," the sheriff said. "Can I turn around? I want to have a good look at you."

"I don't take your word for anything, Barker," Siddons retorted. "I'll make

sure whether you have a gun or not."

Clinton was amazed at the man's cheerfulness. Siddons was as matter of fact as if he were an officer capturing an outlaw instead of being a suspected man holding up a sheriff. Also Clinton had to reconstruct his estimate of Siddons. Siddons fleeing in the night to save himself was one kind of a man. Siddons coming here to protect the girl, for that, Clinton believed, was what he was doing, was a vastly different kind of man. He was a man, Clinton conceded, of Clinton's own breed, or at least of the breed he liked to think was his. Whatever Siddons had done, he was not willing to sift away in the night and possibly let someone else suffer for his crime. Also his love for the girl must be strong and clean. It argued a good heart and a good mind in him.

Where, then, did that leave himself, Clinton asked? Why, it merely put him in a position of spending himself completely for the girl. Her happiness must be assured. She hadn't had much happiness in the past. That happiness, too, was bound up with Siddons' safety. Very well! Siddons must be made safe. He must be placed so that this charge of murder should not touch him. As Clinton had recognized before, he had been hard pressed. He had been deceived and robbed by Haun. He had brooded over his wrongs and had killed Haun. Of course he had not been justified in what he had done, but he was not a cold-blooded slayer. Before the law he was guilty, perhaps, but the law did not always take provocation into full consideration. Anyhow he was a better man fundamentally than Barker, who represented the law. Siddons had had a chance to run away and he had not run away. With Clinton that was an answer to a good deal.

Siddons had come into the room and had advanced to the sheriff. He searched him thoroughly but found no other weapon on him. Siddons stepped back.

"You can look me over, Sheriff," he said. "You can explain about this matter of havin' me picked up, too."

The sheriff came about slowly. His face was purple from rage. Siddons stood up straight and slim. He seemed younger now than he had seemed to Clinton in town. There was, however, the strength and the determination of an older man in his face. All that appeared to be lost on Baker in his anger.

"I call on you to surrender, Siddons," the sheriff said. "I want you. I'm placin' you under arrest."

"About how many men are you goin' to place under arrest for one murder?" Siddons asked. "I heard you say you were goin' to take this fella with you."

"It's a roundup; that's all."

"You know what a bunch quitter is, Sheriff?"

The sheriff had been a storekeeper before he had been elected to his present job. His contact with the cow country had been one of business at first and later one of the law. He was not saturated with the spirit of that country as these two men were, and he was not familiar with the terms. "I don't think I do," he said.

"You come to round up a bunch of horses and gen'ally you can herd 'em along," Siddons said. "Once in a while you will find a horse that will leave the outfit. He's a bunch quitter. We have a bunch quitter here."

"I don't get you," the sheriff confessed.

"This here fella Clinton."

"When a horse quits a bunch you just let him go, do you?" Barker asked.

"If a particular horse quit and I wanted to be rid of him, I would let him go."

"Meanin' you want to be rid of Clinton?"

Siddons did not answer the sheriff. He turned to Clinton. "Fella," he said, "I'm askin' you to ride. You have put yourself to some trouble in this matter already. I don't think it is anything that concerns you any more. You're a stranger in this country, ain't you? All right! I prefer to play a lone hand in this game from now on. I had a partner once, and I don't want no more partners. Will you hop your horse and ride while you got a chance?"

CLINTON knew that the girl was looking at him. He supposed she was thinking of the dangerous situation in which Siddons was placing himself. He felt that she wanted him to remain to help Siddons. But he believed that he could serve her and Siddons best by leaving. He would be free to seek out Dodge and decide what part Dodge should play in all this. He must not, however, tell any of these peo-

ple where he was going. There was no way of telling how long Siddons would keep the upper hand here. The sheriff might turn the table on him. About the time he rounded up Dodge over in the other village, the sheriff, by telephoning, might have men on his trail. Therefore he, too, must play a lone hand.

"That's all right with me," he said quietly. "I never stay where I'm not wanted. I'll ride."

"You stay where you are, Clinton," the sheriff ordered. "You're under arrest."

"Puttin' a man under arrest and keepin' him there are two different things, Barker," Clinton retorted. "I must be on my way."

"I'll comb the country for you and I'll burn you up," the sheriff threatened.

"Your privilege!"

Clinton had not meant to look at Agatha as he passed from the room, but in spite of himself his eyes were drawn to her. He had a feeling that this was a farewell between them. He would very likely not see her again. He would take Dodge to the county seat if there were the slightest reason for taking him there, and he would have no reason for returning here again.

He found that a definite change had come over Agatha. She was suddenly remote from him. He could not determine what, precisely, was in her eyes, but the emotion which was reflected there was not one from which he could take any comfort. It was reproach or disappointment, he thought—or a combination of the two. In any event Agatha was apparently astonished at the celerity with which he had accepted Siddons' invitation to leave. Clinton decided that her basis for whatever she was feeling was that she did not think he would quit at this stage of the game. If he had refused to go, she would doubtless have urged him to do so. What hurt and puzzled her was that he was going of his own accord. He could not blame her. He knew how his action must appear in her eyes.

But the sheriff and Siddons were both watching him closely, and he could give her no sign that he had any motive except to escape and place himself beyond the possibility of danger. So he only bowed and left the room. As he mounted his horse outside, he could hear the sheriff blazing out at Siddons because the latter was interfering with an officer in the performance of his duty. Inconsequential charge that, against a man who had killed another man.

The hammerheaded horse had been ridden more that day than he had been ridden in a long time, and he was already weary. He had been standing in the yard with drooping head, but Clinton had to make him extend himself. He had to breathe him a number of times on the ten mile ride to the village, but he kept him to the pace as much as possible. While Clinton had been in the house, the sky had cleared, and now it was choked with stars. There was no breeze. The whole landscape was wrapped in perfect silence. To Clinton's left there was a rolling sagebrush plain, and beyond that the mountains bulked themselves darkly. There was a kind of majesty in those immutable mountains. Clinton was a man of mountain and plain. He was not in the least sophisticated. He had never tortured himself with doubting questions. With him, whatever was, was. If whatever was did not interfere with him, he let it go unquestioned. If it interfered with him, he had to fight. Action always had been the wine of his spirit.

But here alone in the night, he began to doubt, to question. Probably the emotion which the girl had stirred in him had brought to life something new and strange in him. What was this thing he was about to do? Was he prepared to accuse a possibly innocent man of murder, even though that man were insane? An insane man doubtless had rights which must not be violated. Yet if he were insane he would only be shut up, and he ought to be shut up.

That, Clinton recognized, was not sufficient. What should he do? When he saw the village below him, lying in a hollow of the hills, he stopped his horse. He sat thinking for a long time. At last he shook his head. "I got to give that fella Dodge a square deal," he said. "He's a bad actor. No question about it. But I can't run him into anything that he hasn't got coming to him."

Well, then, hadn't his ride been vain? Was there any use in rounding up Dodge at all? Agatha was sure that Siddons was the slayer. Any decision which she had come to was good enough for him. She doubtless had more to

base her decision on than she had disclosed to him.

"What if I was a sheriff?"

The thought popped into his brain from nowhere, he felt. Probably it had been born of impressions printed on his subconsciousness while he had been watching the sheriff. Certainly the sheriff had been inclusive enough. His suspicions had been directed to Siddons and to Clinton himself. Well, Dodge and Haun had had a scrap. If the sheriff had known about that, he would certainly have ordered Dodge picked up. Could a poor puncher do less than a sheriff?

What it all came to was that Clinton decided that he would just have a look at this fella Dodge and a talk with him. He would do Dodge no injustice. He would be fairer than any sheriff that ever lived. If Dodge seemed in the slightest degree to be innocent, Clinton would not interfere with him.

That straightened matters out. It gave a man a plain trail to follow. So Clinton spurred down to the edge of the village. More time had passed apparently than he had suspected. The village seemed to have gone to sleep. There wasn't a light showing anywhere. Well, there must be a hotel or a lodging house of some sort. Dodge would have to sleep somewhere.

CLINTON tied his horse to a tree and went forward on foot. He found that he had come into the village on a byway. Presently he was looking down what seemed to be the main street. There were perhaps half a dozen buildings on each side of it, stores and dwellings. One square fronted building bulked larger than the rest, and Clinton thought it might be a public resort of some sort. There was the beginning of a boardwalk where he stood, but he knew that boardwalks in hill towns were likely to be insecure, and he took to the middle of the unpaved street.

When he came to the building, he saw that his surmise was correct. Through the front window he could glimpse a counter with stools in front of it and tables out in an open space. The words "Hotel and Restaurant" were on the window. There was no sign of life anywhere about it, however, and he passed its front and looked along the other side. Here he was rewarded; a light shone from the rear. He walked swiftly along the building till he came to a window. Peering into this, he saw five men seated at a table. They were shooting craps.

They were tough looking customers. Any of them would have roughly answered to the description of Dodge. They were an unbathed and unshaven crew. They had their hats pulled down over their eyes, and they sat motionless except when one of them rose to cast the dice. Clinton judged that the game had been going on for some time. He did not care for crapshooting himself, but he had seen many games. He had noticed that men would start a game quietly enough, but as the game went on, excitement would begin to run through them. They would get to their feet. They would make ridiculous gestures, the while they pleaded with the dice, entreating them to roll to the proper combinations.

The man who had been shooting lost the dice and the man next to him took them. This man essayed to rise, but he promptly fell back in his chair. There was a burst of laughter from the others. Clinton saw the man's face crimson below his down-pulled hat. He put a hand, flat palm down, on the top of the table and pulled himself to his feet, the dice clutched in his other hand. Leaning forward a little, he spat out something to a man opposite him. Instantly this man lunged up and struck out. His blow failed to reach the face of the first man, and a third and a fourth man on each side of him pulled him down into his seat.

"Cut it out," came a loud voice. "Dodge is stewed and he's a loser. Man ain't responsible when he's been hit two ways."

Apparently the man had lunged up and struck out in a sudden burst of anger. The anger appeared to have died, and he was not eager to pursue the fight. Doubtless he was afraid of Dodge. Dodge was not afraid. The near encounter seemed to have cleared his fuddled brain a little. He still stood with his flat hand on the table. He still leaned a little forward. His lips were twisted in a sneer.

"Well, Dodge," said Clinton to himself, "you fit into the picture all right. Mebbe you didn't kill Haun, but I'll bet

you ain't lived your thirty-five years or so without puttin' your mark on somebody. Bad! You *are* bad, as bad as any I've ever seen, and that's a few. I'll have a talk with you."

Dodge straightened up and from a little heap of money at his side he tossed a dollar to the center of the table. When his bet had been covered, he cast the dice, breathing on them, his lips moving as he talked to them. His "point" established, he cast again. For a dozen casts he neither made his "point" nor "crapped." Clutching the dice, he walked around the table, the seasoned gambler's superstitious act. Returning to his place, he cast the dice again. Immediately he reached for the money. The man who had struck at him was instantly on his feet, also reaching. Dodge however, had been too quick. He swept the stakes up in his hand and also gathered up the money at his other hand. Then he stepped back, and pushed his hat from his face. Clinton was astounded at the ravages of dissipation on his countenance. There were hollows in his cheeks and his eyes were sunken. The eyes gleamed savagely, however, though receding color left his face gray. That pallor and those gleaming eyes were terrible, Clinton thought. It was the countenance of a man who would kill without much provocation.

DODGE leaned a little and from his waistband he whipped a gun. He played it over the men. His voice was no more than a whisper when he spoke, so that Clinton could not hear what he said. It was evidently a command to the men to seat themselves, however, for they sank, a little blankly, back into their chairs.

Clinton waited till Dodge began to move toward the rear door. Then Clinton ran around to that door and stood on the left side of it. This brought his right fist nearest to the door, and the fist was knotted now. At first there was silence in the room. Then this was broken by a little clicking noise. Dodge, Clinton knew, had withdrawn the key from the lock. He was going to lock the door on the outside and hold the men back till he could make his getaway.

The door was opened and Dodge came through it backward. Clinton let him step down from the threshold. Dodge was not a foot from him. Clinton did not want to knock him out. He did not want to have to handle an inert body. He wanted only to stun Dodge for the seconds that would be required to obtain possession of his gun and the key.

Dodge reeled from the impact of the short-arm blow, but he did not go down. He caught himself by falling against the doorjamb. Clinton plucked his gun from one hand and the key from the other.

"You boys stay back," he called. "I'll take care of this fella. I been layin' for him."

"Who are you?" a voice asked.

Clinton did not reply. He pulled the door shut, inserted the key in the lock, and turned it. Dodge straightened up and turned to Clinton. He was not yet sufficiently master of himself, however, to grapple with Clinton or to strike at him. Clinton pushed the gun up against him.

"No time to lose, Dodge," he said. "You listen to me and I'll get you out of this jamb. Those boys will riddle you if you linger. Where's your horse?"

"Over there in the shed," Dodge said.

"Saddled?"

"Yeh."

"You keep yourself set for a getaway, don't you?" Clinton commented dryly. "Come on."

He hustled Dodge ahead of him to the shed and there found a waiting horse. "Get up," Clinton ordered. "Hold him in. If you try to get away, I'll have to bring you down."

Dodge rode his horse out to Clinton's horse. As he passed the window, Clinton saw the men tugging futilely at the locked door. When they reached his horse, he vaulted into the saddle. "To the county seat, Dodge," he said.

"Who are you?" Dodge asked. "Deputy?"

Clinton considered briefly. What did that question, leaping so nimbly into Dodge's alcoholic brain, mean? Was Dodge merely shy of officers of the law on general principles, or had he thought this a special occasion? Clinton couldn't, of course, decide.

"Never mind," he said. "Ride!"

Dodge, his brain evidently clearing fast, looked deeply into Clinton's eyes. Then he ran his gaze down Clinton's body, sizing him up, and then over the horse. He seemed to be a judge of

horseflesh, for his eyes suddenly blazed. Clinton knew what that flash meant. Dodge had determined that he had the better horse. If he got the slightest chance, he would make a dash for safety.

"Don't try it, Dodge," Clinton said. "I'll be right behind you. If you spur that horse, I'll have to topple you. Get me?"

"Who said anything?" Dodge demanded.

"*I* did. Ride!"

Dodge obeyed, with Clinton following closely.

Chapter IX

THE DISCOVERY

THEY rode in silence till they were near the county seat. Then Clinton bade Dodge stop. Dodge had been riding restlessly, nervously, squirming in his saddle, looking about now and then. Clinton had not needed to repeat his warning to him. Dodge had seemed to be sufficiently impressed by what his turning revealed to him. Clinton kept close to him, and when Dodge looked back Clinton was there implacably, erect in his saddle, steady, as completely master of himself as Dodge was not master of himself. On the last of these occasions, Clinton saw the man shake his head; a sigh that was like a little explosion heaved itself out of his chest.

Now Clinton ordered Dodge to stop. Dodge stopped quickly enough. He seemed to be saddle weary, though Clinton knew that in common circumstances he would not be so. He stood up in the saddle, twisted his body, settled back in the saddle with much shrugging.

"Come 'round, Dodge," Clinton said.

Dodge brought his horse around and Clinton urged his own horse up alongside. He could see Dodge's face clearly now, and he perceived that it was pale and lined and dewy with sweat.

"Not feelin' very well, are you?" Clinton asked.

Dodge pushed back his hat and scraped sweat from his forehead with his forefinger. He snapped his hand down and his hard fingers clicked together.

"If I could get a chance at you, fella," he said, "I would be feelin' better and you would not be feelin' so good."

"Mebbe," Clinton assented. "Dodge, you're a drunkard, a gambler, a professional gunman."

"Got me pegged, haven't you? I'd like to know what you are."

"Haun hired you," Clinton went on. "He was sorta holding you in reserve. You were going to take care of him in case there was any trouble."

"Huh, I had a fight with Haun," said Dodge. "I didn't do no work for him."

"You had a fight with Haun, yes. You were pretty mad at Haun."

"You know a lot about me, don't you? How about yourself? I'd like to know where you come from and what you are doing in this country."

"I was on my way to the outfit you were working for, to get me a job," Clinton said. "I wanted a change of scene."

"I guess you did! I guess it was the dark of the moon when you left the place you come from, too."

"Nothin' like that, Dodge. It's true I've done some driftin' and will do some more. But I can get a clean bill of health wherever I been. Can you?"

"Which is my business."

Dodge's horse moved and Dodge held him in. Clinton noticed that the hand which he lifted was unsteady. He did not believe that anything he had so far said would bring a tremor to the man. It was too indefinite.

"You been drinkin' a lot of cheap whisky lately, Dodge," Clinton said. "It's dyin' in you, isn't it? You need a drink right now."

"You got any?" Dodge asked eagerly.

Clinton saw that the man did need a drink or thought he did. Only clamorous nerves would have permitted him to humiliate himself by asking that question.

"I haven't," Clinton answered. "I never trifle with the stuff. I like to keep feelin' good."

He paused, watching Dodge narrowly. He believed that he had erred in thinking that Dodge might be mentally unbalanced. Dodge might easily have been expected to be on the verge of delirium tremens, but he was not. He was only in the clutch of a great desire for further stimulation. His mind was working alertly enough. He had been evasive, careful; he was thinking things out, mindful not to be caught in any

verbal trap which Clinton might lay for him.

Clinton, then, had to cast about for a reason for taking the man before the sheriff. The sheriff was going to "hang on" someone the murder of Haun. He was not the kind of sheriff to let a mystery in his bailiwick go unsolved. It occurred to Clinton now that Siddons was safe. Siddons had appeared boldly at Haun's because he undoubtedly could furnish an alibi. He probably could prove that he had not been near Haun's all day. So if Clinton took Dodge before the sheriff the officer very likely would pounce upon him. Accusation of Dodge would prove popular. He was a stranger, he was a drifter, and there could be nothing in his appearance or in any argument he could advance which would favor him.

Clinton was a just man. He had always been scrupulous in his dealings with other men. Framing an innocent man would have been abhorrent to him. He even now conceived a bitter distaste for the plan he had formed about Dodge. He saw that even if Dodge had proved to be mentally unbalanced he could not have led him to the sheriff if he had not had more to go on than he had now.

And yet Siddons might not be able to clear himself, and Agatha was in love with Siddons. It was all very well for Siddons to hold up the sheriff, but he could not continue to hold him up indefinitely. He might bind the sheriff and flee again. He might even take Agatha with him if she would go. That would only complicate matters. The sheriff would be furious and he would be relentless. He would start a manhunt. He would rake this county till he found Siddons. If Siddons got out of the county, Barker would flood adjoining counties with telegraph and telephone messages. There would be a reward. Everywhere keen eyed men would be on the lookout for Siddons. Dammit, the whole thing was a mixed up mess! Clinton would have fought to the limit for Agatha, but he seemed now only to be beating into the empty air with his clenched fists.

DODGE seemed to see the puzzled look in Clinton's face. He seemed to feel that his captor was dismayed by something. Dodge leaned eagerly forward in his saddle, so that he brought his face close to Clinton's. Clinton shrank back. The man's breath was fetid with the odor of rank alcohol, and there was a dead look in his face except for the unnatural brightness of his eyes.

"Look here, fella," Dodge said hoarsely. "I'll put my cards on the table. I ain't got a card in my hand that wasn't in the original deck. It's true that Haun had me come on here. I knew him in the East—never worked for him but met up with him."

Clinton shook himself out of his fit of vexed thinking. Dodge was becoming talkative, eh? He would have to listen attentively to what Dodge had to say. Now he was like the drowning man and the proverbial straws. He had little hope that straws would prevent his sinking into the waters of failure, but they might.

"He helped you out of a jamb some time, didn't he?" Clinton hazarded, just why he didn't know.

Dodge began to laugh strangely. Clinton wondered anew if the man were not really mad. There was a hint of madness in that laughter. It was really the venting of a nervous man's relief, but Clinton did not realize that. Well, he had tried to force Dodge and he had got nowhere. Let Dodge lead now!

"I get you," Dodge said. "You was workin' for Haun your own self. He brought you on here when me and him had a row. Haun was afraid. You know that. He was expectin' somebody to show up here and sink some lead into him. Whyn't you say Haun had hired you?"

"Sometimes a man says too much."

There was nothing in that to bring doubt to Dodge's mind, but doubt, Clinton saw, came there swiftly. A look of dismay spread across the gray face. "No," Dodge muttered. "It ain't that. You wasn't workin' for Haun. If you had been, you wouldn't have come gunnin' for me."

"I didn't have a gun on me when I walloped you back there," Clinton reminded him.

"That's a fact and only makes it worse. No, you wasn't Haun's gunman. I overstepped myself."

Swiftly rage rushed through him as he realized the mistake he had made. It was a terrible rage. It was like fire. The man seemed to shrivel in the sad-

dle. He swayed and one hand clutched the horn as he steadied himself.

Then he began to curse. He emitted such a stream of profanity as Clinton had never heard. And it was all, Clinton saw, merely indicative of a sudden lust to slay. Dodge was in the grip of the killer's passion.

That passion would have left a less experienced man aghast, but it did not leave Clinton so. He had seen raw, degenerate passion sweep through men before. His reason told him that he had done or said nothing which should enrage Dodge like this. What was the basis of Dodge's fury then? Why, he was a man more easily moved to rage than an ordinary man. With slight provocation he had become as insane, for the moment, as Clinton had suspected he might be all the time. How then must he have felt toward Haun for what Haun had done to him? Why, he must have been clear off his head. Haun had overcome him when they had been about to shake hands. Haun had humiliated him before his fellows, had subjected him to indignities. The lust to slay was in Dodge now. How strongly must it have been in him toward Haun?

Why, said Clinton, just strongly enough to have led him to kill Haun—led him to kill Haun in the brutal manner in which Haun had been killed.

Clinton had a strange sense of sweet, soft winds suddenly blowing, of light breaking slowly but surely where there had been only darkness.

Again Dodge saw the change in him. Dodge stopped cursing. For a space the silence was broken only by the sound of the man's labored breathing. He had cursed himself out of breath, but his ceasing to curse did not seem to aid his respiration. He had been shocked again by that change in his captor. He suddenly bent in his saddle and sucked in a mouthful of air. Thereafter, for a while, he panted through parted lips.

"You've abused yourself somethin' awful, Dodge," Clinton said. "Shouldn't wonder if you had a bum heart."

Dodge put a hand to his chest. "It pounds sometimes," he said. "Poundin' now. I am a sick man, fella. Lemme go."

"Dodge," Clinton shot out, "where did you spend today—yesterday it is now, I reckon."

"Why, I was——"

Dodge stopped. Clinton had been thinking more clearly than Dodge. He fully suspected now that Dodge had killed Haun. He had been sure that Dodge would offer an alibi. He had, Clinton guessed, been in the village most of his time since he had been run off the ranch. He would say he had been in the village yesterday. He had been about to say it. Then he had stopped. Into his mind must have come recollection of the interrupted game in the hotel. Those men would not hesitate to swear to a lie to clear one of their own kind. But Dodge was outlawed with them now. Instead of standing by him, they would be in a mood to swear his life away. Clinton had foreseen that. It had dawned on Dodge while Dodge had been about to say he had been in the village.

"Those fellas will fix your clock for you if they get a chance, Dodge," Clinton reminded him.

"What fellas?" Dodge asked desperately.

"Those fellas in the hotel that you had the scrap with."

Dodge was getting himself together, slowly, it is true, but definitely. He was breathing more regularly, and splotches of color had come into his cheeks. In his own way he was a fighting man, and he would fight craftily for himself.

"Oh, them," he said scornfully. "What in the hell do I care about that riffraff? I wouldn't trust one of them across the street."

"You don't trust people," Clinton agreed. "You didn't trust Haun. You were razzin' him a good deal, threatenin' him. Dodge!"

Dodge started as Clinton snapped out the last word.

"Wh-what?"

"You killed Haun."

"Prove it, you snake."

"I don't have to. You will have to prove where you were when Haun was killed."

DODGE stared into Clinton's eyes, holding them, the while he slowly and carefully disengaged his feet from the stirrups. Clinton returned the stare seeking to gather from Dodge's eyes what was passing through his mind; and he failed to see the movement of Dodge's feet.

Dodge flung up a foot, half rose, pressed the foot against the cantle, and launched himself. Clinton was unprepared for the attack. His gun had been hanging in his down dropped hand, and now the weapon fell to the road as Clinton's hold was loosened on it. The strength of fury was in the arms which Dodge wrapped about Clinton. The impetus of his leap carried him against Clinton's body with such force that Clinton was thrown back across his own cantle. He kicked his feet free and his arms went about Dodge. Dodge tried to free a hand for a powerful, short-arm blow, but Clinton held him fast. They struggled and the horse sprang forward, with a drop of its haunches, and a slobbering snort and a shake of its head. The two men, locked in each other's arms, went down into the hard road.

Dodge was underneath as they struck, an inevitable result of their roll. The back of his head thudded, but he was not rendered unconscious. Clinton was sure he must be dazed, but he proved himself an instinctive fighter. Their clasp of each other had been broken. Clinton's hands were on the road, palms down. He lifted himself on them, so that his face was above Dodge's. Dodge flailed out blindly and one of his clenched fists came into contact with Clinton's jaw. Clinton's elbows buckled and he sprawled on his opponent.

He was dazed for a moment himself, but his fall on Dodge prevented Dodge from striking him again for a moment. In that moment Clinton's brain cleared. It cleared the more rapidly since he realized that he was at grips with a killer. He had the background now for realizing that, and Dodge's sudden, desperate attack had been added proof.

Now Dodge was cursing again, vilely. He was indulging his fury, savoring it and what he hoped its result would be, the death of this man on top of him.

He thrust his hands under Clinton's armpits and sought to push him back. At first Clinton resisted, but then he saw that he could gain an advantage if he yielded. He suddenly relaxed and let Dodge raise him. While Dodge's hands were engaged so, Clinton struck him twice with each hand on each side of the jaw. Dodge's hands dropped limply. Clinton, supporting himself with one hand, struck again. Now Dodge went limp all through his body. His chin was a little upthrust, the whites of his eyes showed.

Clinton got to his feet and stood looking down at the man. There was an appearance of decay about Dodge, Clinton thought. His body was so limp inside his clothing. His face was so gray, and a ghastly look was given to it by the half opened eyes. He was breathing again through parted lips, painfully.

Clinton looked about. His thought was of water. He would have liked to dash water into Dodge's face, to revive him. He did not like to see the man lying there, stricken like that. But he did not know where he could find water. He did not dare leave Dodge. He could not tell how swiftly he would recover.

He took a step, intending to stoop over the man and work his arms. Somewhere he had heard that you pumped a man's arms to revive him. However, he had no time to carry out the idea. From beyond him came the *clop-clop* of the hoofs of loping horses. The sound was from the nearby branch road.

He stood up, facing the junction of the two roads. Three riders presently appeared there. He could just make them out, but he judged that one of them was a woman; he judged it more from the way she sat her horse than from any detail of her dress that he could pick out. Also one of the riders was a big man, heavy in the saddle.

"Hi, Sheriff!" Clinton called.

The three horses were dragged to a stop. "Who called?" came the sheriff's voice.

"It's me, Clinton."

The horses had gone into the road leading to the county seat, but now they were wheeled about and there was a smart patter of hoofs toward Clinton. He ran forward to meet the horses. If that were Agatha, he did not want her to see the supine Dodge. His ghastly face would shock her.

"What you got back there, boy?" Barker asked.

Clinton looked at Barker in astonishment. There was an entirely new note in the sheriff's voice. "Boy," eh? Last time it had been "fella," contemptuously.

"I've got Dodge—fella named Dodge," Clinton answered. "I'll tell you somethin' about him."

"Never mind tellin' anythin' about him now," the sheriff said hastily.

He slipped down from his horse and ran, rather spryly for a man of his weight, along the road toward where Dodge lay. Clinton followed him. As he turned he saw the girl put out a hand and lay it on Siddons' arm. How straight and sure she was in her reliance on Siddons! Oh, well——

Chapter X

"Mr. Siddons"

BARKER, with Clinton standing above him, had bent over Dodge no more than a minute when Dodge opened his eyes. The eyes were dull at first, but swiftly they gleamed. Then they focused themselves on the sheriff in the dim light. Dodge rallied swiftly, Clinton saw.

"'Lo, Sheriff," the man said. "Glad to see you here. Where's that fella Clinton? You didn't let him git away, did you?"

"He didn't try," the sheriff answered dryly.

The light tone affected Dodge more than if there had been menace in it. He scanned the sheriff's face from between half closed lids; his mouth hardened. Clinton had a notion that his awful lust was sweeping into him again. However, he seemed to fight it back. He got to a sitting position. He caught sight of Clinton then. "There's the man that murdered Haun, Sheriff," he stated. "You better put your handcuffs on him."

"He can't get away," Barker said. "Can you ride?"

"Sure I can. That's all I want. I want to get out of here." He staggered to his feet and stood swaying.

"Dizzy, huh?" said the sheriff. "This fella Clinton must pack some punch."

"He's a killer," Dodge declared. "You keep your eye on him, Sheriff. I got to be goin', but I'll keep in touch with you. I'll be on hand any time you want me."

"I couldn't think of lettin' you ride off alone," Barker said softly. "We are all goin' into my place."

Dodge considered this for a moment, his eyes traveling from the face of one man to the face of the other. Then his glance went along the road. He seemed to yield, but Clinton knew that he was only biding his time. Argument, he must know, would be useless here.

"All up," the sheriff ordered.

They mounted their horses and rode back to where Agatha and Siddons waited. Those two fell in behind them. No word was spoken till the county jail came in sight. Clinton had watched Dodge, however, and he saw that the man had recovered from the blows Clinton had dealt him. He was conquering his nervousness, too, in this emergency. Clinton knew that he was holding himself ready to attempt to leap through any opening which might lead to escape.

"All down," said the sheriff in front of the county buildings.

He had taken out his gun and he held it in his hand while Dodge lumbered down from his horse.

"Just stand over there, Dodge," the sheriff said.

Dodge obeyed and the sheriff dropped from his horse and walked behind Dodge while they all went toward the jail. Inside the sheriff bade Dodge sit over against the wall. He placed a chair for Agatha, and Siddons and Clinton stood near Dodge. Clinton saw Dodge's eyes go furtively to the two doors and the two barred windows. The sheriff had left the outside door open, and Dodge's gaze hung there for a fraction of time longer than it had hung on the other openings.

THEY sat in dead silence for half an hour. That silent waiting was mystifying to Clinton; but he could endure the mystery, for he knew that it was not only mystifying to Dodge; it was calculated to wear him down. Clinton saw the gunman's hands tighten, saw him swallow hard every now and then. But he would not ask a question.

Clinton kept his eyes away from Agatha. When she had sat down, he had been looking at her, and she had suddenly turned her eyes on his face as she settled herself in her chair. She gave him a long look which told him nothing.

At last the telephone on the sheriff's desk rang, and Clinton sensed that that was what Barker had been waiting for. With a glance at Dodge he turned in his chair and took down the receiver. "No," he said after a moment of listening, "I know he isn't there. He's right here. That fella Clinton roped him. What'd you find out about him? That's the important thing now. Had a scrap over there tonight, eh? Dice game. Oh, of

course, no gamblin'. Just a friendly game. I'll clean out that place one of these times. Wasn't there all day, huh? Rode out in the morning. Woman saw him, huh? That's good. Woman's testimony always worth its weight in gold. Yes, come in."

As the sheriff turned back in his chair, a complacent smile on his lips, Dodge made his break. He came up out of his chair, groping for it. His hands fastened on the rungs and he swung the chair aloft. Clinton gathered himself and Dodge brought the chair around. One of the legs caught Clinton on the cheek, tearing open the skin and digging into the flesh. Clinton felt the sudden flow of blood, and he put up his hand.

The sheriff closed in. Dodge heard him coming, and he wheeled and threw the chair. It caught Barker on the chest and threw him back. Dodge darted for the door. Clinton sprang, and the force of his leap carried Dodge off his feet as their bodies collided. He went down heavily with Clinton on top of him. He was not out, however, and he curved his fist upward and struck Clinton on the mouth. More blood! Doggoned, if there was much satisfaction in this matter of becoming a battle scarred hero. Clinton's anger flashed and before Dodge could strike him again he swung at Dodge. It was a powerful blow, and it jarred Dodge's already weakened body to his toes. Clinton felt the body go limp again, and he stood up. He turned immediately to Agatha.

"Sorry you had to see this, ma'am," he said.

"It's all right," Agatha nodded, though she was a little pale. "You had better let me fix those cuts. You are bleeding. Sheriff, can we have a basin of water and a towel?"

"Oh, I'll—I'll be all right," Clinton said. "I'm not hurt. I'll just hold this handkerchief to 'em. Don't bother, Sheriff."

Queerly enough, he couldn't have let her minister to him. He couldn't let her get that close. He would feel her fingers on his face probably. He knew he would begin to tremble—betray himself. That mustn't be.

"All right," the sheriff said, with a grin which made Clinton flush; this here sheriff thought he was guessing somethin', didn't he?

THEY waited till Dodge revived and then the sheriff ordered him to his chair again. Dodge slumped into it and began to hiccough. He had had enough fighting for the time being.

"How'd you get this fella and what led you to suspect him, Clinton?" the sheriff asked. "On the way in here I 'phoned and had my deputy go over to the village and see if he could find Dodge. He says Dodge was away from there all day yesterday. That hooks in very well with what we already know."

"It was just a hunch," Clinton answered; and he told how he had captured Dodge.

"You're puzzled, I reckon," Barker said. "Want to tell him, Siddons?"

Siddons stirred himself out of a fit of abstraction. Clinton looked at him and saw that he was sorta down in the mouth. Clinton wondered why he should be low in his mind just at this time. Hadn't Agatha laid her hand on his arm?

"You know about me and Haun, don't you, Clinton?" he asked; and when Clinton nodded, he went on, "If ever anybody tells you that brainstorms is the bunk don't believe 'em. I had one. I was out to kill that fella Haun. He certainly did me dirt. After I saw him at his place, I spent quite a while thinkin' things over, plannin', plottin'. I was out to kill him, Clinton. I——"

"From now on I would just forget what you was out to do, Siddons," the sheriff interposed. "You were down there on the lower road."

"I was down there," Siddons agreed. "I had been hidin' out around Haun's place and I found he used that lower road sometimes. Yesterday I was down there, waitin' for him. I was goin' to put a bullet into him, topple him off his horse. Well, you know the ridge is bald up above there with trees growin' lower down. I heard a noise up there. I looked and saw a man comin' over the ridge on a scramblin' horse. He had a rope around his horn and pretty soon I saw he was draggin' somethin' at the end of it. I couldn't make out what it was.

"Mebbe you know how it is when a man gets tied up to one idea. The only feelin' I had just then was that I was mad because somebody had come along. I was afraid Haun would appear and I wouldn't get a shot at him.

"I expected that fella would come bustin' out of the trees any minute, and I knew I mustn't let him see me. I might get a shot at Haun yet. So I drew back in the trees on the other side of the road and waited. Pretty soon this fella Dodge come out into the road on his horse."

"You liar," said Dodge.

Siddons gave him only a glance in which there was not much interest. Siddons, Clinton understood, was pretty well wrapped up in himself and what he had been contemplating.

"He had his coiled rope in his hand, and with one backward look he beat it away from there," Siddons resumed. "At first I was just glad to see him go. I came down into the road again and sat waiting for Haun. He didn't come. Everything was very still down there. Pretty soon I kind of woke up to that stillness. It seemed queer. It was as if there had been a lot of noise and then silence. I found I was beginnin' to sweat. Pretty soon I begun to realize that somethin' had gone wrong. I had a funny feelin' that Haun would never come along that road. I dunno. Somethin' was kind of borne in on me, if you can understand what I mean.

"Without seemin' to make up my mind I got down from my horse, crossed the road, and went up among the trees. You know what I found. Well, I had been there to kill Haun, and I suppose I thought about my own safety first. I started to get out of there. Halfway down to the road I found a handkerchief, a red one. It was wet and I had a notion what had happened. Whoever had killed Haun had broke into a sweat and had dragged out his handkerchief to wipe his face. He had thought he was stuffin' the handkerchief into his pocket but he had dropped it. He must have been a nervous man. Lookit!"

His eyes went to Dodge and the eyes of the others followed his. Dodge had started to sweat. He had pushed back his hat and was mopping his forehead with a red handkerchief. As he felt the eyes of those four people on him, his hand shook. He dropped it into his lap, while sweat rolled down his cheeks.

"Nervous man, Dodge, when the liquor is out of him," Siddons said. "You see, this fella has been a drifter. Villages and towns and cities and the open country has knowed him far and wide, I reckon. Some place, in a city, he must have sent his stuff to a laundry. His name was on that handkerchief."

"You're framin' me," Dodge whined. "You're no better than I am anyway. You was goin' to kill Haun your own self."

"But didn't," said Siddons. "Lucky! No, I'm not much better than you are."

"The club, too," Barker broke in. "I was up there and found it. If necessary I can send it over to the city and get it finger-printed. Also there's Haun's saddle and bridle. I found 'em down by the main road. Dodge must have removed 'em from the horse before he turned it loose. Haun must have been knocked out at first, givin' Dodge time." He turned to Agatha. "I sent some fellas up there to look after your uncle, ma'am," he went on. "I told 'em to bring him down here. Better'n takin' him to your house."

Agatha nodded. She looked at Siddons. "You will stay here for a while, Mr. Siddons?" she asked. "My uncle left a good deal of property. It will be mine. You will get back what he took from you."

"It don't interest me as much as it did," Siddons said. "I—I have got a good deal to think of."

"You mustn't worry. You were saved. You had been hard pressed."

"I s'pose so," he said with a sigh.

Agatha continued to look at him. Her face was still pale. Clinton saw that there was pity for Siddons in her eyes. *No more!* She breathed out a tremulous sigh herself.

Well, said Clinton to himself, Siddons was young. He would get over any brooding, any self reproach. Also he had doubtless learned a lesson.

The sheriff rose. "Come on, Dodge," he said. "I've got to lock you up."

Dodge looked at him with haggard eyes. He got slowly to his feet, shaking violently. He put a hand on the wall to steady himself, till the sheriff took hold of him and, supporting him, led him away.

Chapter XI

COURAGE

THEY sat in silence till the sheriff returned. Clinton had been surreptitiously mopping his face. He did not think Agatha was observing

him. As the sheriff came in, however, she rose promptly.

"Now if we can have that basin of water, Sheriff," she said, "we will fix up this young man's cuts. He has been rubbing his handkerchief into them. He'll get an infection if he doesn't look out."

"Right this way, ma'am," said Barker. "Bring the young man along."

"Right this way, Mr. Clinton," Agatha ordered.

The sheriff led them down a hall to a kitchen, where he sometimes got a meal when he came in late at night. He turned on hot water and put out a clean towel, something in a bottle, and some court plaster.

"Give him every attention, ma'am," Barker said. "He's a nice young man."

"You're a chump," Clinton said.

"I know it," Barker agreed. "You are a mighty good man yourself."

"Get out," Clinton stormed. "No! I mean stay here—stay right here—but keep your mouth shut."

"I know when I'm not wanted," Barker said and withdrew.

Agatha was very businesslike in her ministrations. She had him wash out the cuts and then she put the smarting liquid on them and covered them with the plaster. "You look rather battered," she said, "but you will be all right now. Hurt?"

"Oh, no," said Clinton. He wanted to tell her how cool and steady and deft her fingers had been, but he didn't dare. "Well, ma'am," he said gravely, "you have got a good many things to do. If I can help you——?"

"You could," she said. "You are competent. Mr. Siddons seems so worried that I don't like to ask him. I'm so sorry for him. We have always been good friends."

Friends, eh? That was a nice little finishing touch to what he had observed in the sheriff's office. Why this girl was free—free as the air apparently. And yet——

He remembered she had said her uncle had left a good deal of money. He must find out how much. What he had he could carry in a lean purse. However, he could work and would.

"What can I do first, ma'am?" he asked.

"When they bring my uncle here you——"

"Yes, I understand. I'll take care of everything. Then you will want a lawyer to fix up your property matters for you."

"The property matters won't need much fixing," she said with a little laugh. "Besides the farm there are only a few little mortgages and some cash. My uncle was always getting into unfortunate investments. He was out of ready money when he robbed Siddons. I doubt if there will be enough to pay Siddons back without considerable liquidation. My uncle has been plunging harder than ever since he has been here."

Clinton was ashamed of the sudden bounding of his heart. She was certainly not rich. There need be no obstacle of money between them. Still he was a poor fish to be glad. She ought to have a lot. Nothing was too good for her.

"What'll you do, ma'am?" he asked gently.

She gave him a clear, steady look which held a little surprise. "Do?" she said evenly. "Why, work. I can get a job here in town, I'm sure. I am not afraid of work."

He looked deeply into her eyes. No, she was not afraid of work. She was not afraid of life. She was not afraid of anything. She was a courageous girl, and courage was the thing, always.

"Suppose you and me go and get some breakfast, ma'am," he said matter of factly. "I reckon Siddons would like to be by himself for a while. It's breakin' day."

"I am hungry," she said with a little smile.

"We'll go then," he said. He started for the door and stopped. "After everything is straightened out, ma'am," he said, "I—you—I'll be working round here some place an' I—mebbe I could see you sometimes? Mebbe I could—uh—more'n that even?" he gulped desperately.

She looked at him again, studying him. He did not know when the color had come back into her cheeks. But it was there abundantly now. Her eyes were bright.

"Mebbe you could," was all she said.

HUNCHES

By Reginald C. Barker

Author of "The Fifth Claw," etc.

When Jack Taylor heeded his insistent hunch and went down out of the hills, his partner, Bill Farraday, was moved to great anger over the desertion. But while the mighty hydraulic giant tore gold from the earth day by day, the hunch came to prove itself true in a manner beyond Bill's knowing.

ON THE upper waters of Moore's Creek, a tributary of the Boise River, Idaho, placer mining for gold was in full swing.

With yellow, muddy water swirling around his rubber booted knees, "Little" Jack Taylor worked beneath the blazing June sun, forking the larger boulders out of the race down which the gold bearing gravel was rushing toward the string of sluice boxes at the lower end of a claim. Above his head a silver crescent of water rose and fell, gleaming with a million prismatic colors, as from his post at the hydraulic giant, Taylor's partner, Bill Farraday, elevated or depressed the nozzle of the "gun."

One could not have heard himself speak as the powerful stream of water roared and pounded at the base of a twenty foot bank, from which a huge mass of gravel occasionally would slip into the race with a sodden splash as the giant undermined the bar.

A big black horsefly, buzzing unconcernedly through the fine, many colored spray that hung in the air above Taylor, settled soundlessly and drove its bill into the back of his sunburned neck. With a wholehearted malediction the placer miner raised a hand and made a swipe at the scourge, knocking it into the water to be whirled away. Over at the giant, Bill Farraday grinned; then, after glancing at the sun to make sure that high noon was at hand, waved a hand to his partner.

Thankfully, Taylor climbed onto the bedrock, and hurrying up to the penstock on the hill, shut off the water. The roar ceased and the giant stood idle with a little stream still trickling from its brazen mouth.

"How's she coming?" asked Farraday as Taylor joined him and together they started back to their cabin and dinner.

"All right, Bill." The tone of the younger man's voice was sullen, almost defiant, "but I've got a hunch that I'd oughter go home."

"Huh?" There was surprise and dismay in the tone of Farraday as he stopped and looked down at his partner. "You're crazy, man; plumb nuts. How in the name of a nugget can you go home *now*, when it's all the two of us can do to handle the work on the claim?"

Taylor rolled down the tops of his hip boots, then he straightened up his insignificant height of five feet two, and stood wistfully gazing at the distant summit of the divide beyond which lay his little ranch in the Boise Valley.

"I know that I ought not to leave just now, Bill," he acknowledged, "but my hunch tells me to go home; and I'm going."

Farraday did not reply, but softly whistling between his teeth, entered the cabin. The slam of the stove covers as

he started a fire showed plainly what he was thinking.

Fraught with significance, silence fell between the partners as they seated themselves at the little hewn table and heaped their plates with beans. Taylor was the first to speak.

"Didn't you ever have a hunch, Bill?"

"I did," was the short answer. "I had a hunch that I was a condemned fool to stay pardners with you after you went and got married, and my hunch come true." He speared at a bean with his fork so viciously that the tines only grazed it and it leaped from his plate and tried to fly out of the window. "Married men," sneered Farraday, "is no more like us old bachelors that that bean is like a hummin' bird."

"You're a good partner, Bill," said the little man placatingly, "and you're a first class placer miner, but there's a lot of things you don't know about being married."

"There's a durned sight more things that you don't know about mining," retorted the big miner, "or you woudn't think about leaving me to work the claim alone."

"My hunch says 'go home'," explained Taylor, "just what is wrong, I don't know, but——"

"Maybe the turkeys have got the mumps," suggested Farraday sarcastically.

"But I'm going to see," concluded Taylor. "I'll be back in a week or ten days if all is well."

Farraday swung his long, booted legs over his bench and unfolded his six feet of height. "You can go plumb to Ashtabula, Ohio, for all I care," he snarled, "but you don't need to come back. You and I are through."

"D'you mean that, Bill? Better think twice about that," said Taylor quietly.

"Once is a plenty," retorted Farraday, "we may as well weigh out the gold, so's you can take your share along. The share of the claim and the machinery you can have valued; I'll pay your for 'em later."

Taylor loved the gold scale which had been his constant companion for many years; from Nome to Cananea it had accompanied him in his wanderings, weighing to the last grain the little piles of precious metal, which occasionally he panned out. Now, from the shelf above the double bunk he took and opened the worn mahogany case, and set up the delicate instrument which had cost him ninety dollars. As he watched the vibration of the balances his blue eyes saddened, for it crossed his mind that he was about to weigh his hunch against his love for Bill Farraday.

"What's the use of getting mad over a little thing like a hunch, Bill," he said pleadingly, "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I ain't mad," asserted Farraday, "but if you can play your hunch, I can do the same; and my hunch tells me I'll do better alone."

With a sigh Taylor took a buckskin sack of gold dust from beneath the mattress of the double bunk, and first untying the thong around its neck, tipped a stream of golden grains into the pans of the scales until they balanced evenly.

"Well," he said as he poured his own share back into the sack, and watched his partner drop his into a tobacco can, "some day I'll be back. If you still feel the same way we'll settle up then for good. So long, Bill."

Farraday did not answer as he tossed his can of gold dust carelessly on the bunk. Then without taking any notice of his partner's outstretched hand he strode out of the cabin and soon Taylor heard the hydraulic giant once more angrily roaring.

With his hand on the gun, Bill Farraday stood through the long, hot afternoon playing the stream against the stubborn red gravel and watching the yellow flow of mud writhe its way down the race toward the sluice boxes; but above the roar of the water, all the rest of the day he seemed to hear the last words of his partner, "So long, Bill."

AT SUNSET Farraday shut off the water; then he stood for a few moments thoughtfully eyeing the the gravel bank upon which all that afternoon he had been playing a steady stream from the giant. Undermined by the stream from the nozzle a huge mass of red earth and water-washed boulders hung ominously above the slowly emptying race.

"Hunch!" gritted Farraday aloud. "My hunch tells me that I'd better get some of those boulders out of the race before that muck drops."

With an eight tined sluice fork in his hand he stepped into the water and

began furiously to lift out the larger of the stones.

Slowly the light faded from lavender to purple and from purple to gray; but still, with the perspiration dropping from his forehead, and soaking through his thin, blue cotton shirt in dark patches, Bill Farraday worked on and on; so engrossed in what he was doing that entirely he failed to notice that no longer was he alone.

"Say, pardner."

Farraday turned quickly as the harsh voice cut into the evening silence. Standing on the edge of the race was a powerfully built man with wandering black eyes set close together beneath a backward sloping forehead. With the knotted fingers of one hand the stranger tugged at one corner of a heavy red mustache, as he glanced here, there and everywhere, except at Farraday.

"What do you want?" There was a certain ugliness in Farraday's tone, for all the afternoon he had been brooding over the fact that his partner had left him to work the claim alone.

"Name o' Bascomb," grunted the new arrival, "came up from the valley to hunt a job; met a little guy who claimed to be your partner and said you were short a hand. I gotta hunch I seen him before some place but can't just place him. What's the matter with putting me to work?"

"Miner?" asked Farraday with an appraising glance at Bascomb's barrel chest and wide shoulders from which hung arms thick and long like those of a gorilla.

"Miner is right," growled Bascomb, "or anything else that calls for the strength of two men. I'm a bear at moving boulders."

"All right, partner," said Farraday, relieved at the thought of securing help he needed so badly, "you can try out your strength in the race tomorrow. Let's go and eat."

When they entered the cabin, Farraday saw with surprise that the gold scale still stood where they had left it. Carefully he dismounted it and laid it away in its mahogany case. Bascomb watched him with narrowed eyes.

"Looks like you might have had a cleanup," he intimated. "How's she paying?"

"So-so," grunted Farraday shortly, for he was of no mind to discuss his affairs with a stranger, "you better go after a bucket of water while I'm starting the fire."

Bascomb had only worked a few hours next day, before it became perfectly evident to Farraday that the man had not boasted or exaggerated when stating that he possessed the strength of two men.

Knee deep in the swirling yellow race, he lifted out boulders which weighed all of two hundred pounds with the ease of a child removing a toy boat from a puddle of rain water. A surly, noncommunicative brute of a man though, was Asa Bascomb, as carrying a blackened corn cob pipe upside down between his big teeth, he wrestled with the boulders on Farraday's claim.

Farraday had never met a man like Bascomb, and the more he studied his employe the more puzzled he became; for although he tried his best to draw the man out, Bascomb either could not or would not talk. A giant physically, he appeared to possess only the mentality of a child, and like a child he seemed interested only in simple things.

"Ever in Nome?" asked Farraday one day while they were eating lunch.

"Nome?" Bascomb tugged at one corner of his huge mustache. "Yes," he acknowledged after much thought, "I've been to Nome." He fell to eating again, then added suddenly, "There's ice and snow at Nome."

"There was some pretty rich ground there too, wasn't there?" hinted Farraday.

"Ground?" For a moment Bascomb's wandering eyes were still. He seemed to be trying to remember something; then he sighed and gave it up. "I don't know," he said, "maybe."

"What were you doing there, that you don't know something about the rich strikes that were made?" asked Farraday.

"Me?" said Bascomb. "I was chucker-out at Caribou Carson's Café. When the boys got too rough I used to take 'em by the necks two at a time and knock their heads together before chucking 'em out in the snow."

FARRADAY himself was more than six feet and his weight was one hundred and ninety pounds, but as day after day covertly he sized up Asa Bascomb, he began to feel a

fear of the man's immense strength. Should those gorilla like arms ever close around Farraday, he knew that his ribs would crack like a soft shelled walnut beneath the palms of a boy. It was not that Bascomb had ever shown the least inclination to take advantage of his strength; stolid of face and chary of speech he reminded Farraday of a great ape as with the huge muscles of his back and shoulders bulging his cotton shirt, impervious or indifferent to the heat and the attacking horseflies which buzzed around him, he hoisted the dripping boulders out of the swiftly flowing yellow race.

Seldom did Bascomb ask questions; seldom did he evince any interest whatever in anything except his work. At night, while Farraday lay on the bunk reading one of the old magazines he and Taylor had brought with them to the hills, Bascomb would sit, all humped over on a three legged stool, with his head between his great paws and his j ws moving, as reflectively he stared at a chromo above a calendar which hung on the cabin wall. There was nothing extraordinary in the colored print; it was just one of the usual things put out by a life insurance company in which Farraday held a policy. But it seemed to possess a strange fascination for Asa Bascomb.

"Who is the strong guy?" Thus one night Bascomb broke a silence which had endured since they had quit work for the day.

"Strong guy?" repeated Farraday, as puzzled he looked up from his book. Then, as he followed the direction of Bascomb's pointing finger, it suddenly came to him that the man could not read.

"That," explained Farraday indicating the chromo on the wall, "is a picture of Atlas supporting the world on his shoulders."

Bascomb chewed systematically for a full minute, then he expectorated and inquired, "What did he do that for?"

"As near as I can remember," replied Farraday scratching his head, "Atlas tried to bust his way into Heaven, but they got the best of him, and to hold him down, piled the whole world on his shoulders."

"Some strong guy, I'll tell the world," said Bascomb. "Wonder it hadn't busted his back."

The next day at noon Farraday stayed in the cabin to throw out the last of the cooked beans, for during dinner he had thought them to be turning sour. Then he washed the kettle, before setting on some more beans to cook. When he reached the claim, to his astonishment Bascomb was kneeling at the head of the sluice boxes with a gold pan in his great paws. Oblivious of Farraday's approach he whirled the pan of gravel in his hands, until at last there was nothing left in it but a thin string of yellow grains. After an appraising glance Bascomb washed them out into the race and laying the gold pan down where it was kept at the head of the boxes, turned—to find himself facing Farraday.

There was not much reason for Farraday to have suspected the man of nefarious designs upon the cleanup; had not Bascomb possessed such superhuman strength and such diabolical features, in all probability Farraday would not have given the matter a second thought. As it was there was smoldering anger in his tone.

"If there's any panning going to be done on this claim, Bascomb, I'd rather do it myself."

Bascomb clenched his great hands until the knuckles stood out white against the tan. Then a gusty sigh broke from the huge chest of the miner, and picking up his sluice fork, he moved heavily away like a great dumb beast.

"'S'all right, boss," he said, "I ain't trying to bust into your heaven."

"You can turn the water into the penstock," ordered Farraday.

Feeling strangely at odds with himself he strode over to the giant, and soon a silver bow of water rose high into the air. Farraday depressed the nozzle of the gun, until the powerful stream bit into the red gravel bar, and down the race into which Bascomb had returned with his sluice fork, rushed a steady stream of boulders and mud.

Standing at the giant, Farraday watched the huge shoulders of the man in the race as he strained at the heavy waterwashed boulders, some of them still sticky with gobs of the yellow mud in which they had been embedded. With his shirtsleeves rolled to his shoulders, Bascomb was throwing out the smaller stones with the sluice fork, but when a swirl in the water advertised the presence of an exceptionally large rock, he would lay the sluice fork down on the

edge of the race, and plunging his thick, hairy arms up to the shoulders in the swift current, grip the boulder with fingers strong as steel tongs. To the heaving of his immense shoulder and back muscles the top of the rock would slowly emerge, slick and shiny as a rain-washed watermelon. Higher, higher Bascomb would raise the huge pebble, until at last, bent beneath its weight like an old man of the sea, he would drop it on the bedrock with a great grunt of relief. Then, without a moment's pause he would step back into the race and tackle the next one.

A POWERFUL brute, ran Farraday's thoughts, and the best worker I ever saw, but I've got a hunch that I'd better get rid of him before cleanup time, for if he ever sees the gold—suddenly he gasped and bent almost double, for agonizing as the thrust of a knife pain shot across his middle.

"It's those beans I ate at noon," he groaned aloud. "I thought they were beginning to sour." Then the pain gripped him again with such violence that involuntarily he swung the gun around until the stream struck Bascomb and knocked him head over heels into the yellow waters of the race.

With an animal-like grunt Bascomb picked himself up. Wading ashore, he stood for a moment wringing out the ends of his huge mustache, and watching the liquid mud stream from his clothes; then suddenly he raised his eyes and stared stupidly at a sparkling white tower of water hurtling skyward, then at the hydraulic giant. Relieved of Farraday's guiding hand the nozzle of the gun was pointing upward at an angle of nearly sixty degrees.

"I gotta hunch that something has busted," muttered Bascomb, shuffling toward the machine.

It had. Sprawled on the bedrock beside the giant, Bill Farraday was writhing in agony.

"S'matter?" asked Bascomb. "Stomach ache?"

With both hands pressed to his middle Farraday tried to tie himself into a knot, the while muttering unintelligibly; whereupon Bascomb wasted no more of his precious words, but picking up his employer much as he would have handled a boulder, slung him across his shoulder and carried him into the cabin, where he deposited Farraday on the bunk.

Taking a handful of salt from a sack Bascomb threw it into a cup, which he then filled with warm water. "Have one on me?" he invited, but Farraday only groaned, for the pain was excruciating. Red hot tongs seemed to be squeezing out his life.

Without any show of hurry, Bascomb extended a huge thumb and forefinger and took Farraday by the nose, at the same time pressing a knee into the struggling man's tortured stomach. Involuntarily Farraday opened his mouth to gasp for air, whereupon Bascomb unceremoniously poured a half cupful of warm brine down his patient's throat, paying not the least attention to the wildly flailing arms that beat about his head.

"'S'all right," grunted Bascomb as he stepped back, "I cured a poisoned pup that way once." Then seating himself upon a stool he chewed methodically and stared at the picture of Atlas supporting the earth upon his shoulders.

"Some guy," muttered Bascomb from time to time, "I'll tell the world."

Weakened by the emetic, but out of pain, Farraday at last fell asleep from sheer exhaustion; seeing which Bascomb arose to his feet and lumbered out of the cabin and across the claim to the giant, which still spouted a silver stream skyward.

Just what fascination there is in directing a powerful stream of water into a gravel bank, it is hard to say; yet the job of "piper" is coveted by every man who ever worked on a placer claim. Seldom indeed had Bascomb enjoyed the feel of the swinging gun beneath his great fingers; for wherever he had been employed as a placer miner, his immense strength had always caused the boss to put him to work in the race to wrestle with water washed boulders. Yet, in his dumb way, Bascomb always wanted to get a chance at running the giant; so that it was with a sense of satisfaction that he depressed the nozzle until with a shattering roar the silver stream was busy gouging out the base of the twenty foot gravel bar.

Through the remainder of that hot afternoon Bascomb kept the stream from the nozzle playing to and fro, to and fro across the base of the big red

gravel bar. Now and again a boulder would drop with a splash into the race, more often than not a chunk of surface stripping would slip noiselessly from the upper part of the bar and Bascomb would be compelled to turn the stream aside into the race while he cut away a mass of tangled roots; but by the time the heat of the day began to cool, the stream had undermined the gravel bar to a depth of three, or possibly four feet.

Projecting from the face of the gravel above this cave was a boulder which must have weighed nearly seven hundred pounds. Loosened by the steady pounding of the stream from the nozzle, it fell suddenly.

For a moment Bascomb eyed it, then slowly he swung the nozzle aside and lumbering up to the penstock on the hill above the claim, shut it down and turned the water out through the waste gate.

"I gotta hunch," he muttered, "that I can move that rock."

DRAWING up the tops of his gum boots, which for the sake of coolness he had kept rolled below his knees all that blazing afternoon, he stepped into a mass of sticky gravel, upon which the huge boulder had fallen. It was an ugly, wedge shaped rock some three feet across. The thicker part of the boulder lay next to the race, so Bascomb figured that by turning his back to the undermined gravel bar, he could get those powerful fingers of his beneath the thinner edge of the boulder and tip it over.

It was not a hard lift, for a man possessed of the strength of Asa Bascomb, for owing to the position of the stone, two thirds of its weight lay in that part of it furthest away from the man, a fact which in itself would aid him in his effort to tip it over.

Slowly Bascomb stooped until his searching fingers obtained a firm grip, then gradually exerting his strength, he began to heave. As he heaved, his gum booted feet sank lower into the soft wet gravel which had been washed from the bar behind him. A sucking noise came from under the slowly rising stone as rushing beneath it the air helped to force the mud in which the boulder lay, to relinquish its sticky grip. Behind Bascomb little chunks of gravel began to fall from the undermined bar, but this he could not see, as with every muscle of his body strained to its utmost, he heaved and grunted in an effort to turn the boulder over.

Inch by inch his booted feet sank deeper into the slush, and inch by inch the top of the boulder began to rise, until at last it stood almost on its edge. Then, just as it tipped over, from the face of the undermined gravel bar behind Bascomb, a mass of wet, muddy red gravel slid soundlessly onto his shoulders and pinned him face downward across the boulder as it flopped into the almost empty race.

Fortunately for Bascomb, his head protruded over the edge of the rock, otherwise he would have been suffocated instantly; as it was he was pinned down, helpless to move. His heart seemed to wilt, as behind him he heard the falling of little stones and gobs of mud from the face of the twenty foot gravel bar, advertising that it was about to cave again.

In vain Bascomb tried to move his arms so that he might secure a purchase with his great hands and thus wriggle free; the best he could do was to wiggle his fingers about in the soft mud beneath them. Unless help came immediately he was doomed, for behind him the entire face of the gravel bar was getting ready to break away.

Realizing this, Bascomb opened his mouth and let out a roar that was echoed back from canyon wall to canyon wall. Twice, three times he shouted for help, but so deep was Farraday's sleep of exhaustion, he did not hear, and only the *chukking* of a startled squirrel answered the giant's frenzied calls for assistance.

Just about the time Bascomb had given up all hope, across the claim came trotting a little man with freshly shaven gills, and a smile on his countenance which would have set fire to a snowball.

"Hey," hollered Jack Taylor, "where are you, Bill? My hunch came true!"

Suddenly he stopped in amazement and his mouth fell open, for he had caught sight of Bascomb's big mustached face and popping eyes sticking out over the edge of the buried boulder.

"Help," yelled the pinned down giant, "bar's slipping!"

Taylor shot one glance at the buried man, then one at the gravel bar from which another boulder had just fallen;

that was enough. With a single word of encouragement, he whirled and racing up the hill to the ditch, shut down the waste gate and turned the water into the penstock. Then down the hill he came ten feet to a jump. Seizing the gun, he whirled it around just as the water shot through the nozzle like a big round bar of silver steel.

INTO the mass of gravel which pinned Bascomb down Taylor drove the four hundred miner's inches of water compressed into a stream six inches in thickness. Smack! Gravel, boulders and mud were lifted off Bascomb's back as though blown away by the breath of a cyclone; as Taylor played the nozzle of the gun to and fro, to and fro.

Another instant and Bascomb would have been freed of the weight that pinned him down, but just then, behind him, slowly and deliberately the entire face of the huge gravel bar began to tip forward.

Bascomb could not see this, but Taylor's face went white; then suddenly he yelled. "Got to lift you out of there, old-timer. Look out! Here she comes!"

And deliberately Taylor swung the nozzle until the powerful stream of water struck Bascomb where it would hurt him the least. Like a paper boat lifted by a wave he felt himself propelled through space, then down, down he fell onto the bedrock and into utter darkness. Silent and ugly in intent a hundred tons of red, wet earth slipped from the gravel bar and over the boulder upon which a moment before he had lain.

When Bascomb came to he looked up into the face of the little man who had told him where to get a job. For a moment he stared with a puzzled expression on his homely features, then slowly he crawled to his feet and put out a huge paw. "I had a hunch I'd seen you before, pardner," he growled. "Remember me?"

Taylor's eyes were blank for a full minute, then suddenly he gripped the giant's hand. "Yeah," he admitted. "You're the fellow who kicked me out of Caribou Carson's Café, in Nome, Alaska, nearly fifteen years ago. I told you then I'd get even with you some time. Remember?"

Side by side the little man and the giant strode over to the cabin on the bar. A bit shaky on his pins, but otherwise all right, Bill Farraday met them at the door. "Well!" he exclaimed as he caught sight of his partner. "Had a hunch to come back, did you?"

"I came back after my gold scales—and the settlement, if you still want it," grinned Taylor, "I left them here purposely so's you could weigh the clean-up."

Farraday stepped aside to allow Taylor and Bascomb to enter the cabin. Soaked and muddy, Bascomb sank down on a stool. Taking out a sopping plug of tobacco he bit off a huge chunk, and rhythmically moving his jaws to and fro, stared resentfully at the picture of Atlas supporting the earth on his bowed shoulders.

"It can't be done," muttered Bascomb, wagging his great head to and fro. "I'll tell the world."

"Well," grinned Farraday turning to his little partner, "how did you find the wife? I'll bet everything was O. K. and that your hunch was all wrong. Never did believe in hunches myself; there's nothing to 'em." He did not mention the matter of settlement.

"That's where you show your ignorance, pardner," said little Jack Taylor quietly, "my hunch was right enough. It was a boy, and we named him *Bill!*"

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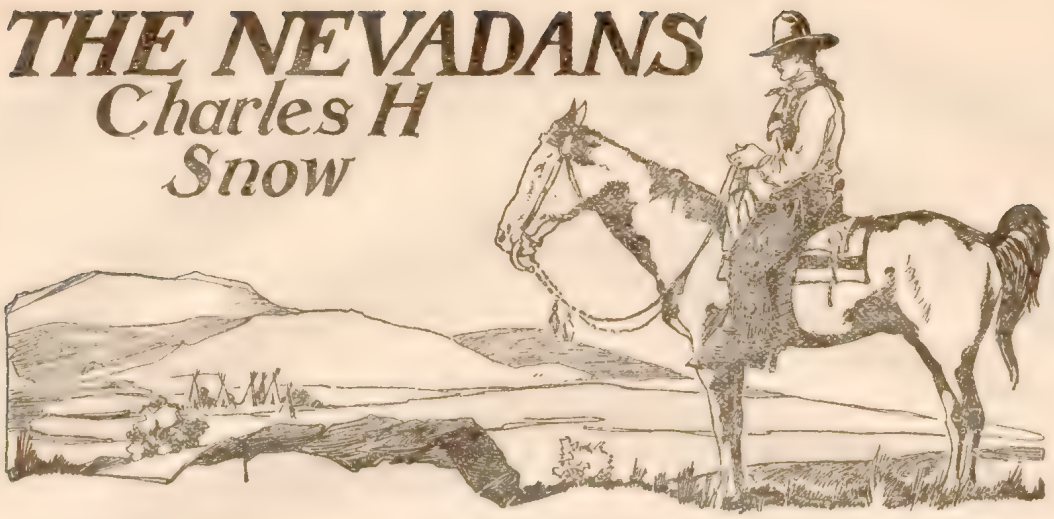


Part I

Tried for his life because of the smooth trick of a Mexican murderer, James Manning fights his way to honorable acquittal—and to a knowledge that on the virgin range of central Nevada awaits a glorious opportunity for a man with courage and fists of steel.

Chapter I

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

IN THE years directly following the close of the Civil War, Virginia City, Nevada, was in the heyday of its boom. The world has never seen, and likely will never witness another like it. Since then there have been many boom mining camps, silver and gold, bona fide and fake, but Virginia still is the criterion by which the magnitude of these booms is measured.

Its population was heterogeneous, but all alive. Wealth was plentiful and life was cheap. Virginia had its good men, its good women; its bad men and worse women. "A man for breakfast every mornin'" the slogan became, until of its very monotony and senselessness it grew tiresome. Then came the Vigilantes, and a better, cleaner camp. The bad men who had not been hanged went to other camps. Still Virginia was bad enough.

The spirit of Virginia was one of excitement and adventure, where living was a great gamble, and in many cases life itself the stake. Preachers, bankers, merchants, miners, everybody bucked the stock market during the daytime. The majority of them sought the games of chance at night. In a day ministers forsook the cloth and turned gamblers, millionaires became paupers; miners capitalists, and clothed their broad breasted, broad hipped wives in silks and satins, and took them down to San Francisco where for them they built ostentatious mansions.

The clock behind the long bar of the El Dorado registered half past two in the morning of the twenty-first of June. The business of the night was about over. The bartender worked listlessly, talking the while to a half drunken patron. A few men, anaesthetized by liquor, slept in the chairs ranged along the walls. The black oilcloth covers had been spread over the roulette and faro tables at the rear of the room. But one gambling layout still ran; it was a three-card monte game in a small chamber behind the barroom.

The monte dealer, Juan Martinez by name, was a California Mexican of mixed Spanish-Indian ancestry. He was a heavy, solid man, at first sight more obese than muscular; yet his movements as he manipulated the three cards were quick and dexterous, disclosing alertness and strength. His beady, calculating black eyes were not upon the cards, but upon the face of Dave Buckmaster, the red bearded miner who was the sole player. There was but one other man in the room, and he was not gambling. Instead, he sat in a chair against the wall, near the dealer, and was intently perusing a San Francisco newspaper.

This man was James Manning. He was young, something under thirty, and

his garb contrasted vividly and to its own credit with the garish raiment of the Mexican and the rough clothes of Buckmaster. Manning gambled, but never at such trifling games as three-card monte. He played the stock market in the daytime, and faro at night. He was not a particularly handsome man, yet there was a sort of fascination in his rather long face, with its thin nose and cool gray eyes. They gave the impression that he preferred attending to his own affairs rather than to those of others. He wore black broadcloth, and his boots shone brilliantly black. A black cravat contrasted harmoniously with white linen. A wide brimmed soft hat lay upon a chair beside him. No one could say aught against James Manning, other than that he gambled. He kept his own counsel, and conducted himself as a gentleman of the period.

As was often his custom, Manning had gone to the monte room to read after the faro games had closed. He preferred the comparative quiet of the place to the whisky laden, tobacco saturated air of the main barroom. He would retire at three, rise at ten, breakfast, and go to the stock exchange. As usual he paid no attention to the game, other than to realize that Buckmaster was well under the influence of liquor, sullen, and losing consistently.

SUDDENLY a blasphemous oath from the miner caused Manning to look up from his paper. Buckmaster's face was as red as his beard. His blue eyes glistened malevolently.

"That!" he shouted, and placed his last twenty-dollar piece on the card he thought was the ace of spades. Martinez turned over the card. It was the ace of diamonds. Calmly, and with a subtle smile he raked in the coin.

Grasping the edge of the table and half rising, Buckmaster leaned forward and glared into the snakelike eyes of the Mexican. Then he said angrily and deliberately, evidently forgetting that he was unarmed, or too contemptuous of the Mexican for ordinary precaution, "You cheated, you damned dirty greaser! I saw you shift the cards. Give me back all that money!"

The right arm of the Mexican moved with lightninglike swiftness. The hand entered his open shirt front, came out. There was a flash of glistening metal; a stroke, swift as light; a guttural cry; and Buckmaster sank to the floor, blood gushing from his heart. Martinez rose, glanced at the knife, dripping the life-blood of his victim, coolly tossed it upon the floor near where Manning still sat half stunned, raked the coin from the table into his pocket, opened a door and was gone into the night.

THERE was the sound of voices and hurrying footsteps in the main barroom. Buckmaster's death cry had carried far—to the bartender in the main room, and on to a constable who was passing. The officer burst through the front door as the bartender rushed from behind the bar.

"Killin'!" cried the officer. "Where?"

"Back there," replied the bartender, and allowed the officer to lead the way to the monte room.

Buckmaster lay face downward upon the floor, his heavy red beard spread grotesquely beneath his massive head, a widening pool of blood about his heavy body. Manning, still half dazed, had picked up the dagger, and stood absently turning it in his hand, holding it, however, by the handle, that his long fingered white hands might not be smirched with blood. His whole feeling was one of incredulity, revulsion, abhorrence. It did not seem possible that this small, keen edged piece of polished steel had ended the life of a great strong man, or that he could have been witness to the deed. Without realizing it he read the initials "J.M" carved crudely upon the bone of the dagger handle. This too, could not be true. He must be dreaming. Yet he was brought wide awake by the voice of the officer demanding, "Who done it?"

"The Mexican," replied Manning, and the sound of his own voice seemed unreal. He had seen men killed before, but never so intimately as this. "I saw him do it. He went out that door. They quarreled over the game. I was reading, and hadn't paid much attention to them." Color was reappearing in Manning's white face.

"Give me that knife," ordered the officer. Manning obeyed, extending the gory weapon that it might be grasped by a portion of the handle. The officer examined it critically for a moment before raising his gaze to meet Manning's.

"Your name is?" inquired the officer.

"James Manning."

"And 'J M' is cut on this handle," continued the officer. "That might stand for James Manning, mightn't it?" His glance held open suspicion.

"It might," admitted Manning, the full significance of the situation breaking upon his mind, "but it doesn't. I merely picked it up from the floor, where it had been tossed by the killer. I can swear to that. I never owned such a knife, I assure you."

The officer again examined the handle of the dagger, muttered something unintelligible, and turned to the bartender. "Say," he demanded, "was there a Mex here, dealin' monte?"

"Yes, but I thought he had gone to his cabin. He generally quits about two."

"What was his name?"

"Always called him Juan," replied the bartender. "Never knowed a greaser to have two names. He might have had another one."

"Was is somethin' beginnin' with a M?" asked the officer.

The barkeeper shook his head thoughtfully. "It might have been," he returned, "and it mightn't. He's on the payroll as Juan."

Again the officer scrutinized the dagger. His brows puckered with deep thought. Evidently satisfied with his deductions, he turned to Manning, who stood expectant.

"You're under arrest for the killin' of this man," said the officer. He drew his revolver for the first time, and trained it upon Manning's breast, at the same time commanding the bartender to search the prisoner for weapons. They found a derringer in a soft leather holster at Manning's left armpit and a bowie knife in his left boot.

"You've got killin' weapons on you," began the officer.

"I had before you relieved me of them," corrected Manning.

"You had 'em," growled the officer, "and you might just as like have owned this knife too. It's the sort your kind might carry. There might have been another feller here, and there mightn't. That's for the Vigilantes to say. There's been too much killin' in town, and they're out for puttin' an end to it."

"I am at your service, sir," said Manning, his face setting and his form stiffening, yet his tone that of the born gentleman that he was. He realized the seriousness of his predicament, and the strength of the circumstantial evidence which was against him. Also he knew the value of silence, and kept it. The officer was extending the manacles for Manning's wrists.

"I'll give you my word of honor that those things are not necessary," said Manning. "I shall not try to escape or give battle. I did not kill this man, and I have nothing to fear."

"All right," the officer grumbled, and marched his prisoner toward the street, "but I want to warn you that you'd better get a good lawyer, who can talk some, if you don't expect to get used to a new style of necktie."

"Let me do the worrying," returned Manning grimly.

"You've sure enough got my consent, pardner," replied the officer.

Chapter II

THE HIDDEN VALLEY

WHEN Martinez slunk into the night his predominant thought was flight. A craven coward at heart, he had struck with the hatred of a viper; and having killed, the consequences of his deed appalled him. It had been a flash of cunning near true inspiration which had made him cast the dagger at Manning's feet. Of course he had cheated the drunken gringo—*como no?* If the coincidence of the initials only made another gringo pay for his crime, Juan would be satisfied.

As he hurried through the dark deserted alleys, keeping away from the main thoroughfares, he thought rapidly. He was already a fugitive from California's justice, which precluded any possibility of his seeking refuge there, sparsely peopled though the State then was. To northward lay the towns and the railroad—possible capture; the telegraph might head him off. To southward stretched a wide region almost unexplored, ending in the vast, waterless desert. It held no fascination for his cowardly soul. He chose the route to eastward, along the course of the old Overland Trail, by which he might reach the Mormon settlements of Utah.

Peering from the mouth of a dark

alley into the wholly deserted main street, he saw three saddle horses tied to a hitch rack before a building from which came the strains of blatant music and the sounds of roistering. The horses belonged to cowboys from the lower country, who still were reveling inside the dancehall. He stealthily crossed the street, and with the unerring instinct of a race that had ridden horses for many generations, he chose his mount. The horse was a tall, rangy animal, likely of stock imported from one of the Eastern States. It was fractious at first, but soon quieted under the caressing touch of the Mexican's hand.

Less than two hours of darkness remained when Martinez rode out of the camp upon the old road leading toward the dawn. Behind the cantle of his saddle was a rolled blanket holding some food, a small quantity of clothing, and spare ammunition. At the pommel, opposite the coiled riata of the cowboy, hung an empty canteen. It would be filled later. At Martinez's side swung a heavy revolver, and inside his open necked shirt was another knife. The steel blade was his favorite weapon at close quarters.

The old Overland Trail long had been the thoroughfare over which rolled the heavy freight caravans, bearing their slowly moving cargoes past Virginia to the other silver camps of central and eastern Nevada. The completion of the railroad had, however, not only changed the mode of traffic, but in many instances, laid out entirely new routes for the freighters. Even now the Overland Trail was used but little. For the first part of his journey Martinez kept to the trail, and when dawn broke above the low, jagged horizon beyond the desert he must cross ultimately, he was well out of the mountains, and entering a region of lower hills. Behind him rose the Sierras, before him a rolling, apparently never ending vista of sage.

Before sunrise he swung from the trail to northeastward in a wide arc. His purpose was to avoid the trail, yet parallel it, returning within sight of it at intervals to secure his bearings. Once out into the desert, if forced by thirst, he could return to the trail and find water. The frequent roadhouses long utilized by the freighters had not yet been wholly abandoned.

DURING the first hours of his flight Martinez forced his horse. By the time the sun had reached the zenith he had ridden far. Knowing that he must conserve the energies of his mount and of himself, he made his first halt in a grassy glade amongst the sage. There was a small spring. Picketing the horse to graze, Martinez ate, and lay down to sleep in the shade of a clump of sage. He planned to resume his flight in mid-afternoon.

Wearied by the hard ride and the unaccustomed use of the saddle, Martinez slept soundly. He was brought back to consciousness by the loud snorting of his horse. A moment later the animal neighed in a friendly fashion. Springing to his feet, Martinez saw a horseman riding up the glade. His first thought was that this was an officer, but a closer observation of the man and the manner in which he sat his saddle dispelled this fear. The rider trotted his mount up the glade, and hailed Martinez cordially.

"Hello," replied the Mexican. "Workin' cattle?"

"Roundin' up a bunch of beef to drive up to Virginia tomorrow," offered the stranger. "Was just ridin' out for stragglers. Have you seen any?"

Martinez replied that he had seen some good steers over the ridge to the west. The rider, throwing a leg over the horn of his saddle, proceeded to roll a cigarette. When he had lit it he said, "Which way you a-ridin'?" He eyed the Mexican narrowly.

"Down to the Walker Valley country," replied Martinez, who spoke English fluently. "I hope to find work with some cattle ranch down that way."

"Well, you're off your course," advised the cowboy. "You've got to head that way." He waved a hand to southward. Then he turned in his saddle to appraise the tethered horse.

"Seems to me I've seen that hoss o' yours somewheres, pardner," he said.

"*Quien sabe?*" laughed the Mexican. "You might have. Yesterday I bought him from a man from one of the ranches. He was up in Virginia and went broke on the wheel, and was drunk. I wanted a horse, and he was cheap, *muy* cheap; and the saddle, it is a good one too."

"Say," demanded the stranger, "ain't

you the feller that used to deal monte in the El Dorado, up in Virginia?"

"*Si,*" admitted Martinez, unable to refrain from occasionally using his mother tongue. Outwardly calm, he was nevertheless frightened at thus having been identified. "I was, but I got tired of gamblin'. I used to ride cattle, and you know how it is when a man is a cowman. I have to get back to it." He shrugged his fat shoulders. "It is *bueno* work, with the smell of the cattle, and the grass and the sage, and the big outdoors, Señor."

"I *sabe,*" agreed the stranger, and smiled appreciatively. Yet as he rode on ten minutes later he felt some suspicion as to the truth of the story he had heard.

The Mexican stood for a half minute, fingering the revolver at his side. He might send a bullet into the back of the rider, and thus eliminate a possible foe; then again he might miss. He was not a good shot with either revolver or rifle. He reconsidered, and began saddling his horse.

The instincts of his Indian ancestors aided Martinez in his flight. Not once again was he seen by man or forced to seek the trail for water. On the fourth day after his flight from Virginia, he was entering a region where again there was water, if but little. The terrain, though still desolate and arid enough, rose gradually and steadily. Upon the upper reaches of the mountains, not so far distant but that they could be reached before another night were scattered piñon and juniper. Martinez knew that where timber like this grew there was grass and water.

Almost as early as the first miners in Nevada had come the ranchers, who had the foresight to see the future in cattle, not silver. On the sixth day of his flight Martinez was again in the region of plentiful grass, scattered waterholes and creeks, and infrequent settlements. The last he studiously avoided, though he had come to fear pursuit but little. It was the custom of the times that when a camp is rid of an undesirable, to let him go. If the cowboy whom he had met beyond the desert should give any information, it would lead the pursuers toward the Walker River country, as Martinez had intended.

IF A line were to be drawn from a point on the southern border of Arizona, not far from the town of Nogales, to the northwestern corner of Idaho, about half way along its course it would traverse the summit of Old Baldy at right angles to the old Shoshone Trail, up which Martinez rode in the late afternoon of the tenth day of his flight. Striking the trail, padded hard by many generations of Piutes and Shoshones, he abandoned his course along the wagon road, which would have led him to the silver mining camps farther east. He craved neither civilization nor the society of white men. The uncanny powers of the telegraph filled his soul with mortal dread—and more than once he had seen the Vigilantes at their sinister, businesslike work.

Its summit full eight thousand feet above the sea, Old Baldy rose like a great loaf out of a long undulating range which separated two valleys of variable width. About noon Martinez had ridden across one of these valleys, the one to westward, where it was less than half a mile wide. Now far to the south he could see the same valley widening, reaching between lines of encompassing, serrated mountains, until it merged into the blue of the distant horizon. Still almost as primitive as when made, it was a land of sublime vistas, of magnificent distances. It seemed a never ending sea of sage, the great billows of which were vast, detached mountain ranges, and wide gray valleys. Even the half savage soul of the Mexican was visibly impressed by the splendor and breadth of it all.

Through the valley Martinez had crossed ran a thin stream, dry at intervals, but occasionally watering narrow meadows along its flat banks. Far to the southward Martinez traced the course of this stream, knowing that its head was where the encompassing ranges met beyond the horizon. Northward the stream followed what appeared , from the Mexican's point of observation, to be a narrow canyon. Along the course of the stream ran the new freight road, which led from the railroad to the silver camps to the south.

Martinez had noted that, though used less than a year, this road already was cut deep. A few miles south of where he had crossed the road he could make out dimly the dark dots which he knew

were the buildings of a teamsters' stopping place. Twenty miles farther on, where his keen eyes followed the yellow ribbon of road as it swung eastward, Martinez discerned a faint smudge of smoke against the shoulder of the mountain. He guessed it was one of the newer silver camps.

Northeastward, where the stream opened out into a wide meadow land, now green, Martinez saw a more pretentious habitation. This was the ranch of Daniel Wilshire, a hardy pioneer, who saw the future in cattle and commerce rather than direct mining. Wilshire's ranch was also a stopping point for freighters and the daily stages between the railroad and the mines. From where Martinez sat his horse, scanning the region carefully, he could look down the course of a long canyon that led to the Wilshire ranch. This was a land well watered and of abundant grass, and he knew that lower down, the canyon held a pretentious brook that joined the larger stream near the distant ranch-houses.

The larger stream, perhaps the longest for its volume in all the world, is shown on the maps of Nevada as a river, and it is said that an enterprising California promoter with a highly developed sense of humor, once organized a navigation company to operate a line of steamers upon its narrow surface. In its entire length there is, except when the snows of spring are melting or a cloudburst strikes the high ranges along its southeastern course, not enough water to float a ferryboat. For the purpose of this narrative it will be known as the Invisible River.

HAVING no object in surveying habitations, other than for the purpose of avoiding them, Martinez resumed his journey. While this journey had been a harrowing one, neither man nor horse bore the signs of fatigue that had marked the earlier days of flight. For the past five days grass had been plentiful, and three days before Martinez had roped a calf, which he butchered. Since that time he had eaten bountifully, though upon meat alone.

To eastward a great peak shone bright with the sunset upon its rounded summit, and all about it stretched mountains, mountains. To north and south rose mountains and ranges of lower hills, surrounding a great valley that opened to the northeast. This valley apparently had its head at the very eastern base of Old Baldy, and Martinez rode swiftly now, that he might look down into it before darkness obscured the sight.

Half way down the mountainside he pulled up at a low ridge, with the head of the valley below him. Already it was wrapped in semi-twilight, but even so it appeared dull green from the lush grass upon its bosom. Near the middle of the area of dark green, campfires twinkled dimly in the gathering gloom. The Mexican knew the fires were those of an Indian village, and felt no fear. There he would find rest and food, and possible protection. The peculiar shape of the small valley impressed him strangely. The valley lay like a great upturned hand, the fingers of which extended into the four canyons of the mountainside, the thumb a grassy flat between two low rocky points to the north.

"El Valle de la Mano de Dios!" exclaimed Martinez devoutly, and crossed himself after the manner of his race, forgetful of his own questionable moral standing. "It is the Valley of God's Hand, extended to me, and in it I shall find peace and protection. I have ridden far, and in good cause, but fate has led me here. Here I shall abide, with friends, and safe from my enemies." He had spoken in Spanish, and with true religious fervor.

Chapter III

SAMSON

DEVOUTLY grateful for the protective refuge, and far enough from his crime to believe himself as much a martyr as a murderer, Martinez began a descent into the valley. The rounded shape of the upper portion of the mountain was changing lower down to broken, rocky ridges, down one of which led a well beaten trail.

Martinez could see that from each of the four canyons a stream ran. These brooks joined into one channel near the middle of the grassy portion of the valley. In the gathering darkness the lines of willows along the banks of the streams gave them the appearance of veins across a gigantic palm, joining

in a great trunk artery, extending into the wrist, which was attached to the mighty forearm to northeast.

Night had fallen black when at last Martinez emerged from the canyon and rode out upon the floor of the valley, the hoofs of his horse making no noise upon the grassy carpet. It was indeed a peaceful place. Above, from the dark arched vault of the sky a million stars scintillated with desert brilliance. Behind him the grim bulk of Old Baldy reared shadowy and silent against the west; and above the summit shone a faint afterglow of the day. Out in the valley the fires of the Indian camps shone, and from their direction came a dull crooning of voices.

Martinez rode on with no fear of the Indians, for these tribes never had been warlike. He felt he was the master of such people as these. Somewhere out in the thumb of "La Mano des Dios" a coyote set up its first night song, to be answered by a medley of barkings from the camp. A minute later the dogs of the camp broke into a very bedlam. They had discovered the intruder.

Now when he was within fifty yards of the camp a fire flared brilliantly. He saw a man throwing sagebrush upon the flames. He hurried on, seeing in the bright glare of the flame a score of motionless figures, silent, fantastic in the flickering light. All the Indians wore nondescript garbs of civilization, which caused them to resemble more a ragged lot of vagrants than a band of warriors.

One figure, however, stood out predominantly among the others. This was a veritable giant of a man. He must be, Martinez thought, full six feet five or six inches in height, and was built proportionately, from his bare feet to the top of his massive head, which was turbaned in a red bandanna handkerchief.

"Buenas tardes, amigos!" cried Martinez, reining up his horse at the rim of the firelight. He received not so much as an answering grunt.

"Hello!" he then tried.

"Hello you," replied the giant Indian, with a voice like a deep rumble. "Where you go?"

"I come here, to your camp," said Martinez. "I am a friend, who is tired and hungry. I would eat and rest."

"Good," returned the deep voiced giant. "Get off."

Martinez obeyed, drawing the reins over the head of his mount and dropping them to the ground. He strode forward and gave his hand to the great Shoshone, who grasped it heartily, so heartily in fact that Martinez thought he felt his bones crack.

"How?" rumbled the big Shoshone. "You Injun?" Martinez did indeed look more like an Indian than a Spaniard.

"Maybe so I Injun; anyway I'm your friend," replied Martinez. "I have come a long way, for many days, beyond the mountain, and I would rest and eat."

"Maybe so you horsethief," ventured the Shoshone with stony impassivity.

"No," said Martinez.

"Maybe so you killem man."

"No. I am a good man." Martinez shook his head, and flinched. "I am a wanderer in this great desert, and when I saw your fires I knew they were fires of friends. Am I right?"

"Maybe so. You say you like eat?"

The giant Indian was a personage of importance here, for turning, he spoke a few words in his guttural tongue to the others still silent about him. Then he waved his arm peremptorily. A moment later the last of the other Indians had melted into the darkness among the tepees, and Martinez and the giant were alone.

"What name?" inquired the Indian with direct bluntness.

"Juan Martinez," replied the Mexican. He repeated the name until the Shoshone had mastered it.

"Me Samson," said the Shoshone, with evident great pride in the title.

"Madre de Dios!" exclaimed Martinez who had heard the Biblical tale from the misionaries of the California coast. "You're certainly big enough. Are you the chief of this camp?"

"Me boss Injun," replied Samson. He drew his great height and bulk up majestically, and folded his arms across his breast, meanwhile critically eyeing his visitor. Martinez was as carefully appraising his host, and to his own satisfaction.

Suddenly Samson turned and spoke an order in his native tongue. A slatternly squaw appeared from within the lodge. She was followed by a slim, tall girl of about eighteen or twenty years. Even in the firelight Martinez saw that the girl possessed some beauty. Her

eyes were large and soft, and under the dark olive of her skin flickered a shifting red pigment. Squaw and girl wore gaudy calico, with bright blankets about their shoulders. Samson did not present his squaw and eldest daughter, but instead gave them orders to prepare supper for the stranger.

SAMSON, chief of the Old Baldy Shoshones, was, aside from his stature, neither a heroic nor a romantic figure. Like his tribesmen he preferred to live along the lines of least resistance, especially after the coming of the white men, who made life even easier and more enlivening. Samson had the Indian's taste for whisky. He would drink it in inordinate quantities, when he could get it. This he did upon his rare visits to the mining camps to the southeast and southwest, and when a fortunate prospector came by the valley. Now as he stood, with folded arms and narrowed eyes, apparently supervising his womenfolk, he was in truth trying to determine whether or not his guest possessed any whisky.

Samson's tribal name had been composed of several syllables and as many grunts, but it had long since been discarded for the easier spoken and more romantic one. In accordance with tribal custom, each autumn Samson still led his tribe southward to the Toi-Yabe Range in search of deer and mountain sheep for the winter's meat. It was on one of these hunting trips that Samson first heard the tale of Samson and Delilah, and took the name of the former.

Austin was then in the full blown glory of her great silver boom. Her mills pounded ceaselessly. Life throbbed from one end of her long, steep main street to the other. It was down this street, which extended from the edge of the valley almost to the summit of the range, that the Indians came, returning from a fall hunt in the Toi-Yabes farther south. The great Indian, his long black hair to his shoulders, led the procession. Behind him came the lesser braves in silent, straggling formation, and after these the squaws and deer laden ponies. Life along the street paused to watch the passing show.

Among the spectators to the procession as it went slowly down the street was one James G. Naylor. "Jimmy" Naylor was a thin, virile little man, always full of humor and generally half full of whisky. Because of these attributes, the *Austin Blast*, which he edited, was usually interesting, if not always inspiring. It was his first year in the silver camp and his first sight of the Indians returning from their autumn hunt. He smiled, then grew serious, and rubbed his forehead perplexedly, and turned to a bystander.

"Samson, come to life!" he said. "Look at his hair."

"Samson, hell!" exclaimed the other. "He's just plain Injun. Bet you a thousand dollars he never heard of the Bible, let alone Samson."

"No bet!" grinned Naylor. "But just wait." Forthwith he halted the procession, by striding into the street and placing his diminutive form directly in the path of the giant.

"What you want?" grunted the Indian.

"Better take care of that, Samson," said Naylor, reaching up and taking a strand of the Indian's oily hair in his fingers. "Some of these fine days you'll go to sleep and Delilah'll trim off those locks. Then you'll be a goner."

The Indian eyed him impassively and said, "No gottem Deliler. Get away."

"Haven't you got a squaw?" Naylor held his ground.

"Sure, gottem plenty squaw," admitted the Indian. "Maybe so two, three, four. You like one?"

"Not today," replied Naylor. "Now you just tell those other redskins to wait here, and come along with me." By sheer force of personality and eloquence he led the Indian into the editorial room of the *Blast*. This was a bare walled little room, the furniture of which consisted of some rough shelves piled with exchanges and books, two chairs, and a long table, upon which stood a large inkwell, an array of pens and pencils, and a stack of copy. Sinking into one of the chairs, Naylor bade his huge guest take the other.

"What you want?" asked the Indian, droping to the edge of the chair, which creaked under his weight. He eyed Naylor suspiciously.

"Ever hear of Samson and Delilah?" inquired Naylor.

The Indian shook his head and grunted, "Heap crazy. Maybe so you heap drunk."

"Maybe so," agreed Naylor, and be-

fore further argument he opened a drawer of the table and drew out a bottle of whisky and a large glass tumbler. At the sight of the whisky the Indian's eyes brightened, and he began to lick his chops with anticipation. Naylor poured the tumbler two-thirds full and passed it to the eager hand. It was drained almost at a gulp.

"Good," admitted the Indian, and rubbed a great right hand across his protruding abdomen.

"Ever hear of Samson and Delilah?" repeated Naylor.

"You bet," replied the Indian, now amiable. "You tell me; I like hear again!"

With rare skill and patience Naylor explained, illustrating the lecture with the hair of the Indian and a pair of big copy scissors. It required all this and another stiff drink to get the idea firmly rooted in the new Samson's mind, but when he grasped it he did it well.

"Now Samson," advised Naylor, "you've got to be mighty careful, or some night that prettiest squaw of yours 'll trim your hair and you'll be a goner!"

"Cuttem my hair I breakem damn' neck!" ejaculated Samson. Nevertheless he must have understood and feared, for immediately he produced a large red handkerchief, and coiling his hair upon his head, bound it there under the handkerchief. From that day no one had ever seen Samson without his hair bound up under a red bandanna. A year later he almost killed a squaw with a mighty slap of his hand because among her meager household effects he had discovered a pair of rusty scissors.

There remained but little whisky in the bottle, and Samson eyed it covetously. The two drinks he had already taken, a full pint, had only slightly exhilarated him. At length he asked for the remainder of the liquor, which Naylor poured into the tumbler.

"Pretty small shot," commented Naylor.

"Plenty little whisky," agreed Samson.

"I'll fix it." Naylor was struck with an inspiration, and seizing the inkwell, he poured its contents into the tumbler. Samson grasped the tumbler and drained it at one gulp. Then uttering a mighty war-whoop, he yowled, "All same Samson, heap stout Injun!" And seizing the table by one leg he brandished it aloft, and brought it crashing down upon the floor, wrecking it, and most of the office equipment. Naylor had darted to the door, and out. He returned with five big miners in time to see Samson wrenching the book shelves from the wall and strewing them over the littered floor. It required the six men to eject Samson from the editorial room and place him again at the head of his procession. From that day on he was known as Samson, always manifested great pride in the title, and could repeat the Biblical story by heart whenever called upon, provided the request was accompanied by a drink or two.

SAMSON's appraisal of his Mexican guest convinced him that the latter had no liquor. A man who had ridden far and fast would not be likely to have any liquor left, even though he had started with a good supply. Samson stood, arms folded, answering the questions of his guest in monosyllabic grunts, until the squaw and girl prepared the meager meal of meat, dirty bread, and black coffee. Then, as the Mexican sat down beside the fire to eat, Samson squatted nearby. Martinez said little until he had finished eating. Then he rolled a cigarette, passed it to Samson, and rolled another for himself. As he puffed leisurely he watched the slim figure of the Indian girl, standing silently at the edge of the firelight.

"Your girl?" asked Martinez.

"Ugh," grunted Samson affirmatively. "My girl."

"Want to sell her?" asked Martinez.

"You got whisky?" hazarded Samson.

Martinez was thoughtful for a few moments. He did have a small flask of whisky, but he knew the effects of liquor upon the Indians. At length he decided he did not have enough liquor seriously to affect his host, so he drew a half pint flask from his pocket and extended it toward the eager hand. Samson drained it without so much as drawing an intervening breath. Martinez had treasured the small quantity of liquor across two hundred weary miles, but now he thought he had parted with it to good purpose. Samson licked his lips, rubbed his belly, and tossed aside the empty flask.

"My girl, I sellem," he announced to

Martinez; and turning to his daughter, he commanded her to come nearer, and turn about, that she might display her physical charms.

"How much you pay?" he asked the Mexican. The girl stood silent.

"Twenty dollars," said Martinez.

Samson eyed him contemptuously. "Plenty too little; one hundred dollars."

"Thirty dollars," said Martinez.

"Plenty too little; seventy-five dollars."

"Forty dollars," said Martinez.

"Sixty dollars, plenty too little."

They compromised at fifty dollars and a quart of whisky. Martinez paid over the money at once, and in lieu of the quart of whisky, gave Samson an additional five dollars. Samson called a brave, and giving him the five dollars, immediately commanded him to go to the nearest mining camp, thirty miles distant, to purchase the full amount in liquor.

Without the formality of even the tribal rites of marriage, Samson's eldest daughter became the squaw of Juan Martinez, and by virtue of his keener and more subtle mind Martinez became the virtual chief of the Old Baldy Shoshones.

Chapter IV

TRIED FOR MURDER

THE Vigilantes of Virginia City were not a lawless body of men, banded together to wreak their vengeance upon the innocent. On the contrary, they comprised the best men of the community, representative citizens, of whom any country might well be proud. They came together to remedy a social and moral condition that had become intolerable, through the laxity of law enforcement and the cowardice and corruption of public officials.

The assiduous constable lodged Jim Manning in jail, and promptly reported to the Vigilance Committee. That very morning the Vigilantes met, rather informally, and went into the merits of the murder. After an hour of deliberate discussion it was decided that this case was not one in which it should take summary action. True enough, circumstantial evidence was against Manning, but he was known always to have conducted himself after the manner of a gentleman of the period, even to his gambling and speculating. He was turned over to the lawful authorities.

There was a considerable element that believed Manning guilty of the murder of Buckmaster. The Mexican had fled, of course, with suspicion attached to his going, but realizing his race and the natural prejudice of the populace toward it, this had been the one natural thing for him to do. The very morning following the killing the whole camp knew of the stolen horse, and the next day the cowboy who had met Martinez in his flight reported the fact to the authorities. These same authorities shrugged their shoulders, and announced that they would first try Manning for his life, and if he were found innocent, search for the Mexican later.

Through the efforts of his attorney, Colonel Andrew Jackson Sather, Manning was admitted to bail in the sum of twenty thousand dollars. He produced the sum in cash, from where he told no one, not even his attorney. It was rumored about the camp that during the past year Manning had profited immensely in his speculations on the stock market, aside from his winnings at faro. Being accused of murder did not entail any perceptible loss of social caste, and Manning resumed his usual life, with the exception that he ceased playing faro, and went into saloons only for an occasional drink or some information about the stock market. Every saloon in those days was a clearing house for mining information.

Too busy making history, which for all time will stand out resplendent in the annals of Western adventure and romance, Virginia City had not time to bother with the affairs of county government. The county seat was in a smaller town a few miles lower down the mountain. To this town, on that soft balmy day of Indian summer, James Manning went to be tried for his life.

The courtroom, a long, rough walled inclosure, was packed to its limits. Every bench was filled with bearded miners and men in black broadcloth and black moleskins. Back near the walls, where every foot of standing room was taken, a group of three gaudy blanketed Indians stood, stoically silent. A few Mexicans had come, hoping to see their countryman exonerated of all blame; and throughout the seated portion of

the audience were a dozen women in tightly laced bodices, voluminous skirts and grotesque bonnets. Upon a slightly raised daïs at the end of the room sat the presiding judge, a venerable, smooth shaven man. Before him ranged the opposing counsel and the defendant, at their respective tables.

The jury was not drawn until late in the afternoon, and court adjourned until the following morning. Again the room was filled. The prosecuting attorney was Silas Barnes, a tall, gaunt, Lincoln faced man with withering black eyes and a scathing eloquence. In a speech bitter with vindictive oratory, Barnes made the opening argument.

"Gentlemen of the jury," he said, "I will ask you for a verdict of murder in the first degree, with hanging by the neck until dead as the penalty. I will ask you to take the life of this man." He turned to Manning, who sat white faced with anger, at Colonel Sather's side. "I will prove to you, by evidence which will convince you to a certainty and beyond all reasonable doubt, that this expensively garbed, suave man, for all his appearance of innocence, is guilty of a most culpable crime. Like a rattler he struck, but without warning. You will hear that he is an honorable man, animated by the highest and loftiest motives. A serpent he is, without the honor of the rattlesnake, which warns before it strikes! Here are his fangs." He paused to take the murderous dagger from the table before him. Holding it aloft, he turned it slowly that the men of the jury might see it. "And upon its handle are his own marks of identification, his own initials—J M, James Manning!"

Barnes excoriation waxed even more bitter, and Manning half rose and leaned toward the prosecuting attorney, his right hand going toward his hip pocket. Colonel Sather reached up and drew him back into his chair.

"Don't get excited, son," he whispered. "Not at such little pleasantries as that. He is merely trying to make an impression upon his client, the People of the Sovereign State. Whenever a man talks like that he's tryin' to lay a firm foundation to a weak case."

"I'd like to kill him," Manning whispered back.

"Right now, of course," agreed Sather, "but if he can make you show a nasty temper he's made a visible impression upon the jury."

Barnes closed his argument. Deliberately and with effusive politeness Colonel Sather rose. He bowed to the judge, to the jury, and turning, bowed to the now excited audience. He turned again to the jury.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we will prove the innocence of my client by evidence, not by argument." He sat down.

At first the men of the jury expressed surprise, then disappointment; they all knew Colonel Sather and had looked for persuasive and entertaining eloquence. Then their expressions changed and it was patent that Sather's brevity had made a good impression upon them. He must be sanguine of the innocence of his client.

The first witness called by the prosecution was the bartender. He narrated his version of the murder, under the skillful questioning of Barnes, and was passed by Sather without cross-examination. The arresting officer was the next witness sworn. His testimony was practically the same as that of the bartender.

"Take the witness," said Barnes.

Colonel Sather bit off a fresh chew of tobacco, and spat profusely into the spittoon at his side. "Do you know this gentleman?" he asked, touching Manning upon the shoulder.

"Yes," replied the officer.

"Thank you, sir. And now, in full possession of your wondrous mental faculties, do you believe he killed David Buckmaster?"

Barnes leaped to his feet, his face contorted with anger. He shouted, "I object, Your Honor! The question calls for a conclusion on the part of the witness. I ask that the question be stricken from the record."

"Counsel for the defense has asked the question," replied the court. "Let the witness answer it." Colonel Sather repeated his question.

"He might 'a' done it," said the officer.

"And," shouted Colonel Sather, springing to his feet and bringing his fist down on the table before him, "Methridates, King of Pontus, might have been superintendent of the Con Virginia mine, but he wasn't! Do you think that James Manning killed David Buckmaster?"

The witness flushed and hesitated. "I dunno," he stammered.

"I thought you did not," declared Colonel Sather. "And now, since you are in doubt, do you not think it quite possible that David Buckmaster met his death at the hands of the Mexican, whose first name is known to have been Juan, and whose last name might have been something beginning with an M?"

Again Barnes was upon his feet, shouting his objections. This time the objections were sustained. "We are trying the defendant, not the Mexican," the court admonished.

THE weapon with which Buckmaster had been killed was offered in evidence. Barnes put on four witnesses by whom he tried to prove that Manning was an idler, a man who earned his livelihood by gambling, and that he possessed a violent temper. The prosecution rested its case.

"The defendent will take the stand," announced Colonel Sather, and a hum of excited comment went over the audience.

Under the questioning of his counsel, Manning told an apparently straightforward story of the events of the fateful night. Court was adjourned, and it was not until the following morning that Barnes took Manning in hand for cross-examination. Even when using every device and trick of which he had control, he could not shake Manning's story materially.

"Call Mrs. Margaret McCarthy," said Colonel Sather finally.

There was a slight commotion in the rear of the room, and the crowd made way for a woman who led three small children toward the witness stand. In a polite and fatherly manner Colonel Sather escorted Mrs. McCarthy to the witness chair, and took charge of the poorly dressed children, a boy of about nine, a girl of six, and another boy of perhaps three years. The children sat dangling their skinny legs from their chairs. They were white faced and awed. Their mother, who was a thin, pretty woman of about thirty, with a tired face and work worn hands, looked about with frightened eyes.

"Mrs. McCarthy," began Colonel Sather, "do you know the defendent?"

"I do," the woman replied with a perceptible brogue.

"Do you consider him a gentleman, madam?"

"That I do, Your Grace, if ever there was one."

Colonel Sather was evidently pleased with the answer, aside from being called "Your Grace." "And why do you think him a gentleman?" he asked. "Tell your story in your own way."

"'Tis by lookin' him in the eyes, Your Grace, that you would know him to be a gentleman, without the askin'," she replied, now wholly self possessed, "but if it is proof of it you want, I shall tell ye. Who was it now, when my three children was down with the pneumony and me with the fever, that comes and finds us in the cabin, after my Pat—God rest his soul—had been killed in the Ophir, and me without the wherewith to keep the wolf from pokin' his head in the door, unless I work at my washtub? It was *him* that comes and finds us there, the four of us, near to death, when he comes to fetch me his weekly wash! And does he leave his wash? He does not, but comes back with a doctor and a nurse, and a wagonload of grub. He was a saint sint by the Lord, out of Hivin itself!" Mrs. McCarthy paused to wipe a tear from her face. "Would that convince ye all that Mister Manning is a gentleman, sir?"

"And you consider Manning your friend, Mrs. McCarthy?" asked the Colonel.

"That I do, Your Grace, and why should I not?"

"And now, Mrs. McCarthy," began the suave lawyer, "since you consider Mr. Manning your friend, tell us—did he ever presume upon that friendship?"

Mrs. McCarthy seemed perplexed, then slowly her thin face reddened until it was the shade of beefsteak. She stiffened and glared malevolently at her questioner. "Do you mean to say," she inquired with crisp precision, "that because of poverty and me childer's sickness that this man tried to violate the virtue of me good womanhood? If ye do you're a damn' liar!"

"Thank you," replied Colonel Sather with perfect equanimity. "That is all, Mrs. McCarthy." He turned to Barnes. "Take the witness, sir."

"No questions," snapped Barnes.

"That is our case," announced Colonel Sather. "We rest."

A murmur of disappointment ran through the audience, which had expected a stubborn defense. Barnes launched into a bitter denunciation of the prisoner, painting him even blacker than in his opening address. Manning visibly used all his will to control his anger. It was more than an hour before Barnes, in a fierce burst of outraged dignity in the name of the people, asked the jury to return a verdict of guilty. The audience was so still that the dropping of a pin could have been heard the length of the big room.

Colonel Sather rose, bowed to the court, then to the audience, then faced the jury. "Gentlemen," he said, "I have told you before that the deeds, not words, are the measure of men's worth. I trust the fate of my client to your deliberate judgment. Thank you."

Fifteen minutes the jury stayed out; and hardly an onlooker had left the room. It was a day of quick decisions.

When the men of the jury had filed in and resumed their seats the judge asked, "Have you reached a verdict?" Upon being assured that they had, he said, "Please read it."

The foreman, a big, black bearded man, rose and laboriously read, "We, the jury, find the defendent not guilty, and we all think it is a hell of a note he was tried for a murder he never done."

Chapter V

GENTLEMEN ALL!

THE voice of the foreman had barely subsided before a great shout of acclamation rocked the crowded room. Even those who had come to see Manning sentenced to death were now glad he had been acquitted. The mob began milling about like a herd of stampeded cattle, each member trying to reach the exonerated man and shake his hand.

Barnes, now cool and smiling, stepped to Manning and extended his hand. "I congratulate you upon your acquittal, sir," he said.

"You're a cur and a liar," retorted Manning, ignoring the proffered hand. Then, before anyone could intervene, Manning slapped Barnes resoundingly upon the face. Barnes' right hand went to his hip pocket, but an officer grasped his arm before his derringer could be drawn.

"Order!" shouted the judge. The racket subsided.

"Mr. Manning," said the judge, "you are in contempt of this court. I order you to apologize."

Manning turned to the judge. "I will apologize to you, sir, for my rudeness, but not to this cur." He waved a belligerent arm in Barnes' direction.

"Then I fine you a thousand dollars," said the judge.

"Very well," replied Manning, "I will be glad to pay a thousand just for one good whack at that dog's face." Taking a wallet from his pocket, he counted out a thousand dollars.

The big room, now strangely cavernous that it was emptied of its stifling crowd, was so quiet that the crackle of the greenbacks could be distinctly heard as Manning counted them out. The judge sat upon the dais, a half humorous smile upon his venerable face. A little to one side Barnes stood quivering, his dark face darker than ever with rage. An officer stood at either side of him, ready, for according to the code of the day Barnes had not been disarmed, merely prevented from using the weapon he carried.

At length Manning finished counting out the thousand dollars, and pushed the pile of bills to the middle of the table. Then carefully folding the remainder of his bills, he placed them in his pocket and restored it to his inside pocket. Like all men of means of the period Manning always carried a large sum upon his person. A thousand dollars meant little to him, for he would have paid ten times the amount rather than apologize for an insult which he had meant as a rebuke for a greater insult he himself had suffered.

"Colonel Sather," he said stiffly to his own lawyer, "hadn't we better be going? It will be late when we get back to town."

"In a moment, son, in a moment," replied the colonel. He scrutinized Manning's face intently. Manning waited.

"James," said Colonel Sather, laying a hand upon Manning's shoulder, "I am grieved at your lack of the ordinary ethics of politeness."

"Why?" demanded Manning.

"Because you could not be under fire, and yet remain a gentleman."

"Do you mean, sir," demanded Man-

ning, "that I was not justified in slapping the face of that cur?"

"Precisely, sir!" replied the Colonel. "I have been beaten in a great war; have fought in a cause in which I devoutly believed the right was upon my side; but sir, I have shaken hands with many a damned Yankee officer. Here, in a battle you have won, you have spurned the hand of the vanquished, extended to you in sincere congratulation of your victory. Silas Barnes is a soldier, sir, standing to his guns for the people who have elected him. Why, damn it, Silas Barnes knew he couldn't convict you, but he is going to run for Congress next fall, and he had to do something to get his picture in the eye of the people. Why Silas himself, the last time he and I were drunk together, told me you were as innocent as the Lamb of the Lord. Isn't that so, Silas?"

Barnes bent his head in affirmation.

"But," protested Manning, "no man with an ounce of manhood could take without resentment what he called me."

"Under certain circumstances, no, but on the firing line, yes. Remember, my son, you have been on the firing line, and soldiers are not permitted to choose the ammunition of their foes."

Almost logically, it seemed, Manning's face changed. Color came into it, and a flicker of humor danced in the keen blue eyes. And within him there seemed a great joy surging upward. He had met men who could fight and forgive. He would indeed dishonor the mother who had borne him did he not extend the hand of forgiveness to the foe he had vanquished. He took a step toward Barnes, and as miraculously as Manning's expression had changed, the set, bony features of the prosecuting attorney relaxed.

Swinging out his long, sinewy arms, Barnes sent the two officers sprawling. Then with a mighty stride he advanced toward Manning, hands outstretched. "Drat durn your ornery fire eating soul!" he exclaimed. "I like a man who will resent an insult. Shake! I'm sorry I had to call you names, but remember, 'we're on the firing line'."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Manning.

"Oh, go to hell!" exploded Barnes with a crackling laugh. "Let's go have a drink."

Colonel Sather, who was impatiently awaiting the same suggestion, raised a detaining hand. "Not until the court can join us," he said. "I must first take the liberty to say that the court has fined my client a sum in excess of the amount prescribed in the statutes as the maximum penalty for contempt of this august tribunal."

"The fine is remitted," replied the judge.

"And to what purpose, your honor?" asked Colonel Sather.

"That the defendant may restore it to his wallet."

"For my client I refuse to accept the remission upon these conditions. It would be a rank insult to the magnanimity of my client. He is not an Injun giver."

"Mr. Manning," said the judge, "since the money is yours, what do you propose doing with it?"

"With your permission, sir, I suggest that we give it to Mrs. McCarthy. It will help her over the winter."

"The motion is sustained. It is very worthy of you, sir. Is there any other motion to come before this court before it adjourns?"

"If the motion is not out of order, your honor," replied Colonel Sather, "I suggest that we all adjourn to the bar across the street. Inside I feel like Death Valley in the middle of August."

"The motion is sustained," announced the judge, rising with alacrity. "I'm not quite as dry as the Colonel, but I'll admit that my gizzard feels pretty well parched."

LED by the judge, the procession left the courthouse and went directly across the street. Behind the judge walked the lawyers, recent foes, now arm in arm, and behind them came Manning and the sheriff.

The place was crowded almost to its capacity. Along a section of the bar, back of which glistened mahogany and glassware and mirrors which had cost a modest fortune, stood the twelve men of the jury that had acquitted Manning. They were in the act of raising their glasses, whisky filled, when one of them espied the judge and his coterie. They turned, glasses in hand. "Come, and j'ine us," said the foreman of the late jury. He was Tom Huxley, the richest rancher of the Carson Valley.

When the glasses were filled the judge

raised his glass and turned to Manning. "And here, Mr. Manning," he said, "is to a whole neck and a long and happy and prosperous life. May sunshine and fair ladies ever smile upon you. Here's hell!"

To the man they drank raw corn whisky. The glasses were refilled and drained, and filled again, but they did not drink hastily. Between libations there was much talk, social, of the mines and ranches, of the late war. Even here in the West, where men from all quarters of the globe met and mingled, there was still a high sectional feeling. Twice the arguments grew somewhat heated. The shadows of evening were lengthening when at last the seventeen men agreed that it was time to disperse.

Huxley, who for all he had drunk was as steady as a rock, advanced and took Manning's hand. "Young feller," he began, "I want to give you some good advice. Don't go into saloons except for liquor. You're a fairly decent sort of a feller, but you have seen the evil of bad companions. If you associate with gamblers you most likely lose all your money in the end, and before the end you'll lose your good reputation, the most valuable gift of the gods, sir.

"My advice to you is that while you have money, go into cattle. Be a gentleman. Some day the mines'll peter out, and the camps'll be deader'n doornails; but the grass'll keep right on growin' and beef'll keep right on bein' born and growin' up into steers, and the cows'll keep right on havin' more calves to make more beef. It's perpetual motion, young feller, perpetual motion. Now, out in the central and northern part of this State there is more'n a million acres of the best cattle range that the sun ever riz on, and it's all vacant. Go out and get a passel of it for yourself and your progeny before it's too late." There was fatherly sincerity in the cattleman's voice.

Manning turned to the judge and asked his advice upon the subject. "It's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," replied the judge.

"Then I'm going into the cattle business next spring," announced Manning. "But first I'm going back home to see my old father and mother. I've been figuring on it ever since the railroad was completed, but kept putting it off. You know how it is."

They all knew, and in explaining how they knew once more lined up to the bar.

"Here's how," saluted Huxley, "and to a good trip, and hopin' you find your pa and ma right well. It'll be some different ridin' on the railroad to the way I come out by ox team. We was five months crossin' in '56. Young feller, if you have the time you might stop off in Springfield, Missoury, and ask if there's still anybody by the name of Huxley livin' there. If you see any of 'em, tell 'em Tom'll be back to bring 'em out to God's country some day." The glasses were drained.

"Well, gentlemen," said Manning, "you will have to pardon my haste. I'm taking the stage to Reno tonight, that I may catch the first train to the East. I'll be back here in he spring, about May, maybe sooner. Colonel, you will see to it that Mrs. McCarthy gets the thousand, and if any other widows and orphans play in hard luck during the winter, just stake them to a playing stake. I'll settle with you in the spring. Good-by, gentlemen." He shook each man's hand in turn, and hurried out and up to the hotel, where the stage was even then preparing to depart on its nightly journey to Reno and the new railroad.

Chapter VI

The Valley of the Invisible

WITH the exception of the silver mining camps, separated by great distances, Nevada was probably the most sparsely settled region of all the West. A rancher who had a neighbor within twenty miles was indeed fortunate. Dan Wilshire's nearest neighbor lived thirty miles away, in the upper valley of the Invisible. He was Peter Barnum, the richest cattleman of the day and region, for his lands along the valley produced prodigious quantities of wild hay, and his ranges were so broad upon either side of the valley that he did not know their limits. It was the day of free government range. One who owned a nucleus with the water controlled an almost unlimited area of mountain range, sage covered upon its lower slopes, dotted with piñon and juniper higher up. The grass in the lower altitudes was sparse but nutritious, and higher in the mountains it was abundant.

True enough, Wilshire had acquaint-

ances nearer him. There was in either direction, north and south, a stopping place or roadhouse, but the men who conducted these places were new arrivals in the country, brought by the completion of the railroad, which had caused a new routing of the traffic into the southern mines. Wilshire was a rancher; he neighbored with ranchers. He had been one of the first to see the future in the valley of the Invisible, and settle there with his family.

Despite all nature's resources and the indomitable spirit of the settlers, those first few years were lean ones for the Wilshires. But they survived, and in 1862 silver was discovered in a canyon of the range forty miles southward. The news of the strike flew apace, by riders of the Pony Express, by voyaging Argonauts seeking the Golden Fleece in the Sierras; and with the apparent legerdemain of the times within a year there was a thriving mining camp in the canyon where the first piece of silver ore had been picked up by a Pony Express rider.

Other camps sprang up to the eastward, and the freighters out of the Sacramento, who had before this made Virginia City their destination, began to extend their routes to the more eastward mining camps. Wilshire had a market for his hay and a portion of his cattle, and prosperity came and abode in the little settlement.

Then came the completion of the first transcontinental railroad, and the making of new routes of travel, one of which led directly through Wilshire's ranch. Wilshire still drove his beef cattle to the camps, but no longer did he have to haul his hay there. Freighters clamored for it at his door, and paid fabulous prices. The location of Wilshire's ranch made it a logical stopping place upon the new freight route, and seeing the advantages of this Wilshire grasped them, though he was by instincts agrarian rather than commercial.

THE Old Baldy Shoshones, like the majority of the Piutes and the remainder of their own tribes, always had been peaceable. They were an indolent, improvident people. Before the advent of the white men they subsisted upon game, piñon nuts, roots and herbs, taking life ever along the path of least resistance. The winter and spring were too cold for the growing of corn. Even after the whites came the Indians did not greatly waver from their aboriginal mode of life, except to eat white man's food when they could get it, and display an insatiable appetite for liquor.

A few of the Shoshones would work, however, and it was upon this minority that Wilshire and the scattered ranchers depended for help in haying time. During the summer months there always camped at Wilshire's a dozen Indian families, for when an Indian came to work in the hay he brought with him his kith and kin. Though the laborers themselves received small wages, the pay in the aggregate was high enough, for it included the feeding of wives and papooses, and in many cases larger children and grandparents as well.

The Old Baldy Indians had come to look upon Dan Wilshire as their friend indeed. His cattle ranged their valley, and for the privilege he gave them the right to kill beef when they actually needed it, demanding only that they inform him of each animal that they intended to slaughter. Never once had he found them abusing this privilege. Sometimes, in the most inclement winters, Samson, the chief, had come to him for food for his people, and he had never refused them flour and other staples which they actually needed. In return Samson made his people understand that Wilshire was not to be imposed upon. This indolent old Indian had absolute authority over his subjects until the coming of Martinez, the Mexican, into the valley which he devoutly called *"El Valle de la Mano de Dios."*

Hay cutting at Wilshire's usually began about the middle of July. In former years the Indians had been on hand a week or ten days before the beginning of the harvest. They could begin to draw rations as soon as they reached the camp, therefore they availed themselves of at least a week in which to become thoroughly stuffed.

This summer, however, it was different. For weeks there had not been an Indian across the Old Baldy trail. The tenth of July came, the twelfth, and at last the fifteenth. Wilshire became worried, for the hay was ripening early, and his surplus carried over from last year was almost gone. The freighters must have feed. Still, he was patient.

"We'll wait a few days," he told Wyoming Smith and Sam Williams, two of his cowboys. "If the Injuns don't come then we'll ride over and see what's ailin' 'em."

"I reckon it's that Mex," said Sam. "He's showed 'em how to eat without workin'. Mexicans is strong on that."

"I reckon that's about it," agreed Wyoming. "But I'm figgerin' they'll be along some day, like as not they've had some liquor, and while they've got liquor all they want for dessert is beef. They've got plenty of dessert so long as Dan's steers hold out."

There was always work to be done that a man could not give all his time to one thing, even worry. If worse came to worse Wilshire could impress Wyoming and Sam as hay hands, yet they were needed all the time on the range. A few men might be hired from the mines or from the freight outfits, upon which many emigrants to the mines, unable to pay the exorbitant stage fares, rode for little or nothing. At all events there would be no real harm to the hay if it should have to stand a few days longer. The night of the seventeenth Wilshire mentioned his worries to his wife.

"I reckon I'll be ridin' across the mountains to see what's wrong with the Injuns," he said, "about day after tomorrow. They ought to be here. The hay's fit. If they're not comin' I've got to find hands."

"Don't go so soon," his wife begged. "Wait a few days more. I don't want you to ride over there if it can be helped. Let's wait a few days, say a week."

To this Wilshire agreed reluctantly. He knew that his wife feared trouble, should he venture into the Valley of the Four Streams. Old Baldy was not so massive and broad that tales of the Mexican's cruelty and debauchery had not traveled across its summit. It was not necessary for Wilshire to ride into the valley across the mountain in order for him to learn actually why his hay hands had failed to appear. The Indians were not doing this of their own initiative. They were directed by a more subtle, more mercenary mind.

So Wyoming and Sam again went to ride the range, and Wilshire for the second time went over his haying implements, repairing rakes, sharpening scythes, making ready for more efficient work when his laborers should come.

One evening he said to Charley Wong, "What's the matter with the Injuns? Think they're goin' to come? The hay's plumb yallerin'."

"Injun come," replied Wong.

"I don't believe you know a damned thing about it, you slanteyed old reprobate." Wilshire had both affection and respect for the old Chinaman, but he usually took this manner of showing them. "Now if it was a poker game, or fantan——"

"Bet you five dollah," said Wong without the slightest change of expression. "Bet you five dollah Injuns come two days, ten dollah Injuns come four days."

"I'll take you both ways," replied Wilshire. "I've got to make money some way."

Chapter VII

VAMOOSE!

WILSHIRE was an easy going man, slow to anger even under trying conditions. When once angered, however, he was almost implacable. He knew the Indians and their weaknesses; had come to take a sort of paternal interest in the former; had long overlooked the latter. Even now a wanton killing of his cattle aroused in him no animosity toward the Indians themselves. He realized who was at the bottom of the nefarious work. He knew that the trouble had only begun, and that before it should end he must have a reckoning with Samson's renegade son-in-law.

Now, however, Wilshire had neither the time nor inclination to force the issue. There was too much work to be done about the ranch, and he would let matters approach nearer a climax. A few steers more or less did not matter greatly; he had hundreds of them, in fact many more than the limited market demanded. He was making more money by feeding the stock of the freighters than from his cattle; yet to feed the freighter's stock he must have hay, and to secure it he needed Indian labor. White help, except for riders, was scarce and demanded almost prohibitive wages.

Four days later Samson came to the Wilshire ranch and brought with him

half a dozen other Shoshones who formerly had worked in the haying. There were no squaws, however, in the party, and Wilshire knew this was either a visit or an embassy. The barefoot old chief seemed imbued with a new sense of his own importance. The other Indians kept silent.

"Look here, you pot-bellied old reprobate," began Wilshire, jabbing Samson in his corpulent midriff, "what do you mean by killing my steers without my consent?"

"Don't kill your steer," replied Samson. "Steer eatem Injun grass, steer belong to Injun. Long time, ten, maybe fifteen year steer eatem Injun grass. Wilshire no pay. Now Injun take steer, plenty steer. Ten, maybe fifteen year Injun plenty hungry. No more. Plenty smart man come to Valley of Four Creeks, take my girl for squaw. Plenty smart man."

It was indeed as Sam Williams had said, Wilshire mused, and saw the futility of argument at the present time. Getting in the hay crop was the immediate necessity. He broached the question of labor to Samson.

"All time Injuns plenty work, get plenty little money," replied Samson.

"Do you mean," demanded Wilshire, "that your men are not going to work this year? Confound you and that skunk of a Mexican squawman of yours, are you or ain't you?"

"Maybe so. How much you pay Injun?"

"One dollar a day and grub for the outfit."

Samson shook his head at the offer.

"One dollar and a half and grub," raised Wilshire. He must get the hay in.

"Plenty little money. All time plenty little money, plenty big work."

"Then how much do you want?" Wilshire knew that he must eventually pay what the Indians demanded if it were within reason.

"Two dollar," replied Samson. "Two dollar for Injun boy, plenty grub, twenty dollar for me, one bottle whisky."

"I'll pay the boys two dollars and give you twenty for gettin' 'em for me, but I'll not give you the bottle of whisky. You damned old skunk, you don't get any whisky out of me, and if I catch you or any of your boys around here drinkin' I'll peel off their ornery hides and stretch 'em on the roof of the barn. You savvy that?"

"Twenty dollar for me, and one bottle whisky," Samson reiterated.

"No!" roared Wilshire. "No whisky."

Samson pondered. He knew finality when he heard it, and his obtuse, still half savage mind had long since taken accurate stock of the rancher, yet he wanted the whisky far more than he wanted the increased wages for his vassals. The twenty dollars, by agreement, was to be turned over to Martinez. At last he said, "Twenty-five dollar you give me, I bringem Injun boy and plenty squaw tomorrow."

WILSHIRE had no option. He knew that once the old Shoshone had given his word, drunk or sober, he would do his utmost to make his subjects live up to it. As for Samson, he figured that he had made a good bargain. He would withhold the extra five dollars, with which he would purchase not one bottle of very poor and very fiery whisky, but two.

The Indians came, and brought with them a great following of squaws and children and useless old men and women, and they consumed a great quantity of food. An Indian always eats against the future, not wholly to satisfy the demands of the immediate present. The men who worked at the haying were sullen and half hearted in their work. Wilshire did not so much mind the money he was losing on the labor as the fact that he was being imposed upon by an unscrupulous interloper, whom he neither had seen nor cared to see.

While a few of the Indians were not scrupulously honest, Wilshire had never suffered any great loss from this source. The squaws, of course, would steal food if it were left within their reach. Wilshire kept his storehouse well locked. Now, however, throughout the haying, various small articles disappeared. Then one day Wilshire missed a new revolver which had been left upon the table in the dining room. The only person who had access to the house, except the members of the family, was a squaw who assisted about the place. When questioned, she stolidly professed innocence of the theft. Neither Wilshire nor any of his family nor the cowboys believed her, and at Sam Williams's suggestion

the Indian camp was searched. The revolver was found. It had been secreted in Samson's blanket. He was taxed with the theft.

"What do you mean by stealin' my gun?" demanded Wilshire.

"Injun no takem," responded Samson with impassiveness. "Maybe so Jennie, maybe so Joe. I think maybe so Jennie, she takem and hidem in blanket."

Wilshire flew into a rage. Jennie was his twelve year old daughter. Joe, her brother, was two years younger. No greater insult could have been offered Wilshire than to accuse one of his offspring of theft, unless it was to accuse one of his women of infidelity.

"You damned old skunk!" he roared, "You and your dirty tribe clear out of here, and clear out pronto! Savvy?" Wilshire's patience was almost at an end.

"Injun go all right," Samson agreed without emotion. "Injun go. Stay gone. Maybe so after while Injun make Dan Wilshire plenty trouble. Maybe so. Goodby."

Forthwith and without further parley Samson herded his followers together and led them across the mountain to their own valley. Wilshire was glad to be rid of them, for his hay was cut and stacked. Next season he would secure help from other sources. As for the Indian's threat of further trouble, Wilshire was so busy that summer and autumn that he had little time to worry over it. Nevertheless it was to be brought vividly to his attention.

Late that autumn Sam and Wyoming were rounding up cattle in the vicinity of the Valley of the Four Streams, when they came across Martinez and two Indians roping and marking calves. Recognizing the cows to which the calves belonged as those of Wilshire, the cowboys charged. Martinez reached his horse and managed to elude the pursuers and gain the shelter of the Indian camp, into which the pursuers were reluctant to follow. They ventured to the place where they had first encountered the thieving trio; ready to administer a sound disciplining to the two Indians, but they had made their escape.

Early in the winter a prospector was found murdered in his camp in the hills to southward. His camp had been looted and his burros killed. It was a moral certainty that the crime had been committed by some of the Indians.

The first snows came early and heavy that winter, only to be followed by thaws and rains which made the freight road practically impassable. It was not an uncommon sight to see a string of high wheeled wagons mired to their hubs in the mud of the road, or to see thirty or forty mules and horses pulling with all their might to extricate one wagon from the mire. Yet traffic moved, for the mines had to have supplies.

Early in December a train of wagons became stalled a few miles north of Wilshire's. Night was falling, and bringing with it a bitter snowstorm; so the teamsters, rather than double up and pull out their wagons that night, decided to unhitch their animals, lead them to Wilshire's, and return next day to extricate their wagons. When they did return they found their freight cargoes looted. Several hundred dollars worth of merchandise had been stolen; but the snows of the night had obliterated all trails.

There were white men in the region who would, or could have committed this crime, but suspicion fastened upon the Old Baldy Shoshones. Later some of the stolen articles were found in the Indian camp.

HOWEVER, the straw that was to break the camel's back did not come until late spring. The snows had gone from the great sugar loaf summit of Old Baldy, and the cattle had begun to range across the mountain into the valley of the Four Streams. Wilshire had resolved to ride his range more freely, but he would not permit one of his men to ride alone in the direction of the Indian camp. On this particular ride Wilshire himself rode with Sam and Wyoming across the mountain. They were well down the eastern slope, when Sam, who had been reconnoitering to one side, came galloping up.

"Suh," he said to Wilshire in his slow drawl, "Injuns under ordinary conditions is plumb ornery, but when they're bossed by a greaser that's a sight ornerier'n any Injun ever was, they're the orneriest critters in the entire world."

Upon inquiring the cause of Sam's agitation Wilshire learned that he had ridden upon three of the best range cows, which had been in good condition

when turned across the mountain. Now they were but emaciated skeletons. Their tongues had been slit in such a fashion that they could not eat, Sam explained hurriedly.

It was the first time either of the cowboys had seen their employer truly angry. For a full five minutes he sat his horse, silent, but with features working. Then he ordered the cows shot. "Boys," he said when Sam and Wyoming had despatched the suffering cattle, "I wouldn't 'a' minded if they had tried to do that to me, but ropin' cattle and slittin' their tongues, so they just naturally have to starve in sight of plenty of grass, is nothin' short of first degree murder. An Injun couldn't 'a' done it alone, he ain't got brains enough. That Mexican's got to go. Are you with me, boys?"

"Ever since I was a boy," drawled Sam, "I've always had a hankerin' to attend Mexican festivities, especially funerals." Wyoming was equally ready.

"Gettin' shet of this here squawman is my pie," said Wilshire. "I just want you boys to ride in with me to see that the Injuns don't double up on me. I'll take care of the greaser."

They descended the remaining slope of the valley and side by side galloped across the flat toward the adobe hut which stood near a large cottonwood upon a slight rise. Beyond it were the Indian tepees, around which lounged the Indian men. Samson was conspicuous among his satellites. Neither he nor any of the others carried visible weapons. The squaws and children could be seen peering half curious, half affrighted, from among the tepees. The Mexican was nowhere in sight. As the three horsemen neared the adobe Wilshire ordered Sam and Wyoming to drop slightly to the rear. He rode up before the door of the hut, and demanded of Samson the whereabouts of the Mexican. Samson pointed toward the open doorway.

"Tell him to come out," commanded Wilshire.

Samson stalked to the doorway and spoke a few words in his native tongue. Immediately the Mexican appeared, scowling and apparently unafraid. The coarse shirt he wore was open at the neck, revealing his fat, hairy chest. Wilshire swung down to confront him.

"You get out of here, and get out damned quick!" bellowed Wilshire, taking a step toward the Mexican. He made no effort to draw his revolver; he was not a gunman. The Mexican sprang toward Wilshire, his right hand going into the open front of his shirt.

"Look out, Dan," shouted Sam, "he's after his knife."

Sam had drawn his gun, but could not use it for fear of shooting Wilshire. He reined his horse quickly to one side, that he might get an unhindered shot. He did not need to shoot, however, for with the agility of a panther Wilshire sprang backward as the Mexican slashed out with a long bowie knife. Before Martinez could regain his balance and strike again Wilshire had grasped the butt of his heavy cap and ball Colt and brought its frame crashing down upon the head of the Mexican.

Martinez uttered a groan and crumpled to the ground. He lay motionless, blood pouring from a ragged cut in his scalp. The Indians began to mutter menacingly; but swinging into his saddle, Wilshire ordered charge. Revolvers in hand, but without firing a single shot, the three riders charged into the group of Indians, sending them scurrying. They turned and rode back, chasing the stragglers into the tepees and other places of shelter. Without their leader the Indians had no stomach for white men's fighting tactics. Samson, like his subjects, had taken refuge in his tepee. Riding before it, Wilshire commanded the old chief to come out. Samson appeared, sullen, but unarmed.

"You old skunk!" roared Wilshire, with an illuminating string of expletives. "I have a notion to shoot you plumb full of holes; but I ain't goin' to do it, not right now. You tell that ornery coyote when he wakes up, if he ever does wake up, to clear out of here quick, *plenty* quick! Savvy?"

Wilshire led the way out across the valley toward the base of the mountain. Entering the canyon trail down which Martinez had ridden upon his first entry into the valley, they were near the point where the trail began its ascent toward the ridge, when out of the willows that bordered the creek a tall young Indian stepped, so stealthily, so noiselessly that only the shying of the horses betrayed his presence.

Wilshire was reaching for his Colt, when he recognized the Indian as Buck,

one of the most intelligent, most industrious of the tribe. Buck announced in good English that he had something important to convey. He had seen the fight from a distance, and was fully aware of its causes. He delivered his information briefly. "You better look out, Dan Wilshire. All time Injuns talk about a big fight over at your house some night." He disappeared into the willows. The riders, thankful for this friendly warning, rode on.

Chapter VIII

THE NIGHT RIDE

WHEN Wilshire rode out of the Valley of the Four Streams that day late in May he was probably angrier than he ever before had been. He had been patient and tolerant to the last degree. A quiet man he was, never seeking trouble; but like men of this stripe, he never ran from trouble when it was thrust upon him. In his mind there was now simply one thing to be done—remove Juan Martinez, dead or alive, from the valley.

Wilshire preferred not to have to kill. For this reason, in the heat of anger, he had refrained from actually killing the Mexican. He preferred to remove him, alive, from the sphere of his sordid influence. Nor had Wilshire's anger cooled perceptibly by the time he and his riders reached home late that afternoon. He had mapped out his plan, with a few helpful suggestions from Sam and Wyoming. He would recruit a band of cattlemen, have them gather at his ranch; and then in one swift attack they would descend upon the Valley of the Four Streams. If necessity arose, Martinez could be hanged. He deserved hanging, according to the code of the times.

"Why don't you go to the mining camp for men? Or the freighters will help you out," Wilshire's wife offered when he outlined his plan.

"This here's a cattleman's affair," he replied. "The miners or freighters might go too far, and kill some of the Injuns. There ain't no special need of hurryin'; that little tap I give the greaser 'll hold him for a week or so. We'll have time to get the ranchers here. I'll have to get word to Barnum, and let him round up the others."

Mrs. Wilshire protested that an attack might come at any time. Had not the Indian, Buck, warned them? She implored him not to leave the ranch unprotected by sending Sam or Wyoming to Barnum's.

Evidently he had already reasoned all this out, for he said casually, "I was figurin 'on sendin' Ada to Barnum's tonight." Wilshire turned to his sister-in-law to see how this suggestion was received.

Ada Bartlett's eyes met his unflinchingly. She was a quiet woman of twenty-five now, rather taller than the average of her sex, and seasoned to out door life and the hardships of the times. She could ride as well as any man on the ranch. And though the journey alone would not be without danger, she did not flinch. She would make the ride at night; a hundred chances to one seeing no one upon the entire journey, except at Barnum's ranch. She eagerly accepted the task alloted to her.

"You can ride my saddle, and Buckskin'll carry you there all right," said Wilshire.

"But I can't ride it sideways, and I can't ride it the other way." Ada blushed, not wholly at the idea of being seen in such an unconventional predicament, but at the thought of saying "astride" or "straddle." She was a pretty young woman under ordinary circumstances. Her blush made her prettier. An argument followed, Wilshire on his side contending that this was neither the time nor the place for senseless modesty.

"Drat rot it, Ada," he protested, "it won't hurt your reputation for you to fork a saddle once, like you ought to. You ain't one of them Nob Hill society queens like we read about in the Frisco papers. You're just a common cowgirl, and maybe if you happened to run across one of them Prince Charmers like Cinderelly done, and was to blush pretty like that, maybe you'd——"

"Dan Wilshire!" She checked him, her face crimson. "I have a notion never to speak to you again. If it wasn't for Milly and the children, and the fact that you're Milly's husband, I never would. Now, I'm not going to put on a pair of your pants and ride straddle like a hoyden!"

A compromise was reached finally. By its terms Ada was to don a pair of Dan's trousers, and wear over them her

own voluminous skirt. Once out upon the trail, she was to lift the skirt and gather it about her in the darkness, having it ready to drop as a curtain and a balm to her feminine consciousness when she reached Barnum's, or by chance met a wayfarer on the trail.

WILSHIRE gave her final orders when darkness had fallen and her preparations were complete. "Tell Barnum," he said, "to get the ranchers out of Big Smoky and the upper valley, and to send a man to Duprey's to tell them to come. Have 'em all gather here. Barnum'll know what to do."

"Can't we get along without Duprey and his gang?" Ada asked, her face going white. Wilshire replied that because of the numbers of the Indians, every rancher would be needed.

"Well, if I was doing it, I would get along without him," she exclaimed.

Though he well knew the reason for Ada's aversion to Duprey, Wilshire did not, under the present exigencies, consider this sufficient cause for dispensing with the services of the rancher and his four men.

Duprey lived at the foot of Juniper Mountain, beyond Antelope Valley, forty miles west of Wilshire's. He was a cattleman about whom vague and not wholly complimentary rumors circulated among the other ranchers. His range was a good one, but even so, his herds had grown in a manner almost miraculous; and whenever cattle were missing from any of the other ranges it had become the custom to say, "Well, like as not Duprey's steers has had another batch of calves!"

In appearance Duprey was a tall, handsome fellow, dark and rather dashing. He always affected gaudy regalia; brightly colored chaparejos, a vivid woolen shirt, and never had he been seen without a heavy red scarf wrapped about his neck. Ever since he had settled in the region six years before, coming from no one knew where, he had been Ada Bartlett's ardent suitor. She had discouraged his attentions from the first, hating him wholly and intuitively, for she was a good woman, and knew he was not a good man. However, he persisted in his suit, and rode over to Wilshire's ranch every two or three months to propose to her. She had consistently refused him. He was a hot tempered fellow, and once in a fit of anger had threatened to ride down some day and bodily carry her off. Though she had detested him more than ever, he had frightened her that day; and now the certainty of his returning renewed the fright.

"Well, I just don't see any reason for having him here," she argued stubbornly. "If he does come he'll cause trouble, and if he bothers me any more I'll shoot him."

"You're gettin' cold feet," returned Wilshire. "I reckon you're just figurin' on findin' some excuse for gettin' out of this trip."

It was a taunt, and Ada whirled angrily to answer it. "Dan Wilshire," she cried, "you know that's a lie! I'll show you!" She embraced her sister, kissed the two children, refused to kiss Wilshire; swung into her saddle and rode off into the night.

For a time her route followed the freight road, then swerved to the right. Within an hour after leaving the ranch she was nearing the spot where the old Shoshone Trail dipped down from the westerly hills to cross the Invisible. The valley was narrow here, and the stream itself swung in close to the hills.

Wilshire had given Ada one of his heavy Colt revolvers, and she reached out to the saddlebags at the pommel to assure herself that it was still there, its heavy butt protruding within easy reach. She forced her horse along, breaking into a gallop where the trail permitted.

She neared the old Indian trail, her mind filled with the legends of the land, in which many grim tragedies had occurred. The babble of the stream in its deep cut bed sounded weird to her sensitive ears. The willows, the sage, the rocks on the ridge to her right, all assumed vague and grotesque shapes and seemed to become alive. Some cattle, watering in the stream, took fright at the sound of her approach, and went crashing through the willows. Upon the ridge a coyote howled. Ada pulled the revolver from its sheath and held it rigidly in her right hand, while with her left she guided the horse, now thoroughly skittish.

Soon, however, she grew cool in mind and body again, for out in the vast val-

ley she was but a tiny moving dot in a world of blackness. The cold night wind of the high altitudes was blowing down from all sides. Unrolling the coat which had been thoughtfully tied behind the cantle, she slipped it on. She shook her skirt down to protect her knees. She was indeed grateful for having worn Dan's trousers; they were practical garments after all.

Steadily Ada held the head of her horse to the south and forced him on. There was no sound save the howling of countless coyotes and the clump, clump of the hoofs of her horse in the soft soil, and the scrape of the sage against the stirrup leathers. She had ridden for three hours when a faint glow shone on the eastern horizon. Then a mis-shapen moon sailed serenely into the sky and the stars dimmed perceptibly. The mountains, the vast gray valley, the sky itself, were suffused with a soft, golden light, in which there was comfort and companionship. There was no longer any danger of losing the trail; now every landmark was dimly visible.

Somehow the night passed and there came the biting cold of the hour that precedes the dawn. Then the barking of many dogs informed Ada that she was nearing her destination. Alighting, she stamped the dormant circulation from her limbs. Then adjusting her skirts, she mounted and rode on.

BARNUM was a tall, gaunt man, with a face seamed and tanned like old saddle leather, and iron gray hair that reached to his shoulders. His thin curved nose and penetrating gray eyes gave him the look of a wary, wise old eagle. He had been the first white settler in the Valley of the Invisible, and before coming westward he had fought Indians and hunted buffalo from Kansas to Texas. He was what he looked, a leader of men.

"I reckoned Dan'd be sendin' for me afore long, from what I've been a-hearin'," said Barnum when Ada had delivered her message. As Ada ate the breakfast which Mrs. Barnum hurriedly prepared, she outlined Wilshire's plans. Barnum listened attentively.

"I reckon it'll work out," he said at length, "with some changes. I'll send a man up into Big Smoky for Hammond and Giddings and Jasper and Kirchoff. I'll have word sent over to Duprey."

Immediately after breakfast Mrs. Barnum insisted that Ada go to bed. It was noon before she awoke. She was still tired and saddle sore, but before evening she was quite herself again. As her brother-in-law had suggested, she began her return journey an hour after dark, a plan which was wholly seconded by Barnum.

It was yet nearly two hours before dawn when she entered the narrow flat where the willows along the Invisible pressed close in to the hills. Somehow she did not feel fear on nearing this spot, as upon the previous night. She spurred her horse onward.

Suddenly, as she neared the old Shoshone Trail Buckskin began to manifest symptoms of fright, swerving from side to side and blowing the air noisily from his nostrils. Drawing the revolver, and digging in her spurs, Ada managed to force the horse almost to the trail crossing. Then, rounding a point of willows, she discerned the faint embers of a campfire glowing before her. Buckskin stopped, trembling and snorting fearfully.

Ada's first thought was that this was the night camp of some passing Indians. She was debating whether to charge past them, or turn and flee, to reach the ranch by a wide detour, when beyond the embers she saw something move. A voice broke the silence.

"Who comes there?" the voice demanded. "Speak up, or I'll shoot." It was not the voice of an Indian, but of a white man.

"It's just—it's just me," Ada stammered.

"My God, it's a woman!" cried the voice beyond the fire. "Pardon me, ma'am. Will you please wait a moment until I put on my trousers?"

It was then that Ada bethought herself of her own trousers. Her legs, trouser clad, protruded from where her voluminous skirts were tucked about her in the saddle. A blush drove the cold of fright from her cheeks. Wheeling her horse about, she retreated into the darkness, and had finished adjusting her skirt when the man, who had thrown some fresh fuel on the fire, shouted, "All right, ma'am. You can come on now." He awaited her in the light of the flames.

Chapter IX

THE MEETING

MANNING had slept lightly that night, waking at intervals to replenish his fire. His last awakening, he thought at first, had been caused by prowling stock. However, upon raising from his blankets, he had made out a rider silhouetted against the moonlit night. It was then that he had challenged. Why was this rider here at such an hour? And then when his challenge was answered; why, above all things, was the rider a woman? Still half unbelieving, he donned trousers and coat and pulled on his boots.

Ada had ridden a few paces, and there she had dismounted. She had no thought of flight now. Blushing at the thought that she had so nearly been detected wearing her brother-in-law's trousers, she shook down her skirts. Then, revolver in her right hand, and leading Buckskin with her left, she advanced. The man stood beside the fire, its glare lighting his flushed, smooth shaven face and rumpled hair. Ada saw that his clothes were of heavy gray homespun, not the conventional raiment of a cowboy. He was indeed a stranger, and more, a tenderfoot. He smiled a welcome to her and said, "Good morning, ma'am."

"Good morning, sir," she replied stiffly, and paused, still unconsciously holding the revolver in her hand.

"You might put that away," he said, indicating the weapon with a gesture. "I assure you on the word of honor of a gentleman, ma'am, I will not harm you."

She uttered a little cry of embarrassment, and tried to find some place about her apparel in which she could sheath the revolver. It was a ponderous, heavy weapon.

Manning stepped round the fire and held out his hand. "You may give it to me," he said simply. She complied, and he laid the weapon upon the ground. Stripping a blanket from his bed, he laid it upon the ground.

"You are tired and cold," he said solicitously. "Will you please sit there? I am sorry my camp offers no more comforts."

Ada dropped and spread her hands to the fire. Her teeth were chattering with cold and excitement. She was wondering why he was here, and he was wondering why she was here, and each was wondering who the other was. He took a rope from his outfit and tied one end of it about the neck of her horse. Ada watched him while he removed saddle and bridle, and thought he did it rather clumsily. Then he led Buckskin a short distance away from the fire, and tied the other end of the rope to a sagebrush. The light from the fire enabled Ada to see the stranger's two horses picketed a short distance beyond.

He took up the coffee pot and went down to the bank of the creek. When he returned a few minutes later Ada could see that he had washed and that his hair was neatly combed. He set the coffee pot upon some live embers.

"Oh," she protested, "you mustn't go to any trouble on my account. I'll be riding on as soon as I am warm. Really, I'm not hungry, and it's only a little way to the ranch."

"Ranch?" he inquired, "Is there a ranch near here? I rode in here in the night, and made camp. If I had known there was a ranch near I should have kept on till I reached it. Pardon me," he seemed embarrassed, "I had forgotten to tell you who I am. My name is James Manning, and I am a stranger in a strange land. You might have guessed that much." He made a gesture that encompassed the litter of camp equipment about the fire. "I am at your service, Miss——?"

"My name is Ada Bartlett, and I live with my sister and brother-in-law five miles down the valley. I was returning from carrying a message for him."

"I'm glad to meet you, Miss Bartlett," he said, taking her hand in his. He thought it seemed very small and cold. "There must be some strong reason to make you ride all night."

"Yes, the Indians have been giving trouble. I went to warn the ranchers up the Valley of the Invisible. That's why I was making the ride at night. I rode to Barnum's last night."

"Indians?" he queried. "I thought they had always been peaceable."

"Yes, until a Mexican came among them a year ago. He married the chief's daughter, and since then the Indians have been getting troublesome. It has become so bad that there is no standing it any longer. The ranchers will gather and attend to them now."

"You say a Mexican came to them

about a year ago?" he said slowly, looking very grave. And as she explained, he recalled the murder of David Buckmaster, and the flight of Juan Martinez, from whom no tidings had come. While she briefly detailed the trouble with the Indians and the vicious influence the Mexican had exerted over them, he turned to the fire, still listening. The water was boiling now, and he put coffee in the pot and set it to one side to simmer.

"Do you think you can stand my cooking, ma'am? If you do we'll have some breakfast. It's most morning."

THE summit of Old Baldy was indeed beginning to lighten with the coming of dawn. Manning had thoughtfully brought a small pillow, and Ada was reclining now upon the blanket. Somehow she felt at ease in the presence of this stranger, and not at all embarrassed. He was different from the men of the ranges and mining camps with whom she had been thrown into social contact. She had seen a few men like him coming through in the stagecoaches from the railroad.

"Of course I could stand your cooking," she said simply. "You're clean. I have eaten food cooked by men who didn't always take the trouble to wash before cooking it. But please don't bother. If you don't mind we'll have some coffee and then ride on to the ranch. We can reach it by breakfast time."

He accepted her suggestion avidly. It would be a treat to eat a properly cooked meal, after subsisting on his own rough fare for a week. Solitude, especially at such an hour, in such a sparsely peopled country, begets companionship; and as they sipped their coffee, this man and woman, thrown together by chance, became very well acquainted for such a short space of time. He told her about some of his wanderings, especially about the trip East, and the winter spent with his parents.

"And you rode on the railroad train?" she cried eagerly. "Weren't you awfully scared when it went fast, and weren't you afraid it would leave the tracks?"

He laughingly explained that it had not traveled very fast; it had required eight days to cross the continent. "I feel a good deal safer on the train than I do on the back of a horse," he added. "I'm not much of a rider. I don't know what I'd do if I ever got onto a bronco."

"You'd get bucked off," she replied, and they laughed without constraint at the thought.

Then, with more than a little pride he showed her the two new revolvers he had brought back from the East. They were of the latest pattern, heavy single-action Colts, shooting rim fire cartridges instead of cap and ball, as did the earlier models. Ada handled them skilfully, for she could shoot as well as most men.

"You know," she said thoughtfully, comparing the weapons with her own, "they must be a great improvement. Now, nobody except my brother-in-law can load this one so all the chambers won't fire together. Have you ever seen all the chambers of a cap and ball pistol go off at the same time?"

"Once, in Marysville in '59, when one gambler shot another. Hit him in five places. The other shot spattered against the frame of the gun."

"Was the man killed?"

"I reckon he was, ma'am. They buried him."

He asked her if he might have the privilege of presenting her with one of the new revolvers, explaining, "The two of them are too much of a load to be hanging at a man's waist. I'm not a gunman, and one will do all the shooting I'll ever have to do. Really, I bought 'em both because I wanted to look like a cowboy. I have some chaps, too." And to prove it he began pulling them on.

"Really, I can't take it," she refused with embarrassment. It was not done, this accepting gifts from a stranger.

"Then you'll carry it, and let me carry yours, and keep it for me till I want it? I may decide to settle round these parts."

Ada agreed to this suggestion. There was no cogent reason why she could not take care of the weapon for him. He had put the matter in the light of a favor, and her generosity made it impossible to refuse. Then too, she had already begun to hope that he would choose to settle here. And like a woman, she asked herself if he was married, and her face grew warm with confusion at the thought.

The minutes had flown unheeded. The world was no longer dark. In the meadow beyond the willows a lark an-

nounced the arrival of another day. The encompassing mountains stood out dully, then clearly as the dawn lightened. A coyote skulked out of the willows and started loping toward the ridge. Raising the revolver he still held, Manning fired. The coyote leaped, and fell dead.

"You can shoot, even if you say you can't ride," Ada cried.

"I reckon it was an accident, ma'am. Anyway, I've burned up enough powder in my life to learn how; but I reckon that was an accident."

"I think it wasn't," she returned.

WHEN at last the horses were saddled and packed and they were ready to start, the sun was peeping over the summit of Old Baldy. Ada led her horse down the high bank of the creek, ostensibly that he might drink. Her real reason, however, was that she might get into the saddle unobserved. This she did, and made certain that her skirts came well down over the stirrups. She had rolled Dan's trousers to her knees, that not even by any misadventure could their presence be detected.

As they rode along in the soft coolness of the morning Ada explained the features of the surrounding region. She talked briskly, even though she had difficulty in reining Buckskin in alongside Manning's gentler horse. Buckskin manifested a desire to shy at almost everything.

Ada told Manning about the Shoshones and their Mexican dictator as they rode along, and by tactful questioning he learned so much about the half-breed that he became convinced that here at last was the murderer of David Buckmaster, with whom he had sworn to have a reckoning.

They had left the freight road and its suffocating dust and were taking a short cut across the meadow toward the house, less than a quarter of a mile distant, when without warning a flock of sage hens rose from the grass almost beneath the feet of the horses. With a ponderous beating of wings the heavy birds took the air. Manning's horse whirled, and nearly unseated its rider.

Worse, however, it was with Ada. Buckskin bolted, straight toward home, and with all her strength upon the reins Ada could not check his flight. Calamity, which she had more than half feared, had come. The speed created a wind, and the wind caught in the voluminous folds of her skirts and raised them till they caught against the saddle, and the ungainly trousers were revealed to the staring multitude, which happened to be composed of Jim Manning alone.

Dan Wilshire had been expecting Ada, and stood looking across the meadow when he saw her coming at breakneck speed. Setting his feet, Buckskin came to an abrupt stop almost against Wilshire.

Without stopping to adjust her skirts Ada flung herself from the saddle. Her face was crimson with anger and shame. "Oh, oh, oh!" she cried.

"Oh, what?" inquired Wilshire when he could check his laughter. "You made a grand finish."

"Oh! He saw them!" cried Ada. "Dan Wilshire, I told you when you made me wear those old pants of yours that something awful would happen. I can never speak to him again." With this she ran past and into the house. Nor did she stop until she was in her own room, and had locked the door, which she refused to open in answer to her sister's peremptory knocking and questioning.

Wilshire, eager to see who "he" was, looked across the meadow, where he saw a horseman, leading a pack horse, coming toward him. He stood smiling as Manning drew rein before him, then he said, "Get off, stranger, and rest your saddle. I reckon you're welcome."

"Was the lady hurt when her horse ran away?" asked Manning solicitously.

"I reckon not," Wilshire replied soberly. "But she's plumb scandalized, sir. Let me take your hosses, while I show you where to wash up. Breakfast'll be ready directly."

At breakfast Ada appeared, wearing her best starched print dress. She hardly raised her eyes during the meal, and professed to have but little appetite. Her face was still flushed, and she seemed very ill at ease. As he ate, Jim Manning thought she was the prettiest woman he had ever seen, and decided that he really wanted to settle in these parts.

(*Part II of* THE NEVADANS *appears next issue*)

TENDERFOOT

S. Bert Cooksley

Sandy was half pint size and he wore a white collar and shoestring tie—tenderfoot when he came and tenderfoot after four years' stay. All Lastville thought Sandy fair game; no one was more sure than "Pretty" Morgan—for Pretty was unaware of certain facts the Tenderfoot never had mentioned.

HE CAME walking into town just when everything was in an uproar. The boys had returned three days earlier from Shannon Creek, hot and tired and bitter for the memory of those who had not returned with them. Sheriff Peters had gone on to Salinas with what was left of the Shorty Moore gang. Lastville had inspected and listened to the returned, had talked day after day of each version of the battle, and decided, however great the price of life paid, the country was a damned sight better off with that gang broken up and Shorty gone in incontinent flight—to the Border, apparently. In every part of the State cattle men had suffered at the hands of Shorty Moore, had lost their stock and their men, had offered during the eight years of his lawlessness reward after reward, and had at last forced old Peters to gather up the boys and go out to get the gang. He'd cleaned them out at the Creek—and he could settle the rest of his lucky hide down for the remaining years in peace. Shorty never would return. Lastville was proud of him and clean proud of the boys who'd helped him. With certain regrets they remembered ones who didn't return. But——

The stranger came walking into town just after the posse, looking for all the world like he'd just climbed off his three legged stool to put the books away in a safe. His thin face and pale smile, the nervous way he'd edge off from a hitched horse and the downright fear he had for women made him the butt of every practical joker that drifted into town.

Not that he ever minded; four years in Pop Davies' general merchandise store, peddling cornstarch and flour to the ladies and chewing gum to the men wouldn't ever develop a temperament. It gave Sandy two things the boys suspected he always had; an amazing capacity for sleep and a positively astounding vocabulary of cuss words. He could curl his five feet four up on a couple of flour sacks and before you could get the makings out and roll a pill he'd be pumping away, blissfully unaware of Pop's eleven shelves of canned goods and wearing gear. And if one of the boys would toss a gallon tin of tomatoes across the store that found rest in Sandy's midship, the sweetest line of double quick cussing ever heard across any border would start out from his pink lips and continue, without repetition or Mexican, for a full five minutes. And if a woman came in it went right on—only she didn't hear it.

He'd come from God knows where, arriving just after the boys had come in from Shannon Cretk. He claimed he'd walked from Salinas, and it was a day so hot the lizards lay right out on the road panting for breath and a cigarette tasted like punkweed. In his thin voice he asked Pop for a job and three hours later—after Pop had shown him his sleeping shack—he'd been accepted in all of Lastville's three saloons, two stores, dancehall and blacksmith shop in the capacity of chief clerk for Pop Davies' Merchandise Emporium.

Now the only unusual thing about Sandy—with the exception of the bunch of yellow hair sticking up in front of his head and the perpetual hitching-up of his pants that made the boys call him "Sandy Snicklebritches"—was the fact that after he'd been in the country four years he still was a genuine dyed-in-the-wool tenderfoot. Nothing could change him. He'd sell the boys cartridges, would peddle them a six-gun now and then, but he'd have nothing to do with the shooting iron himself.

"Point thet demned thing the other way," he'd say when someone was looking over a new Colt. "Point her down even if she ain't loaded."

And as far as horses went—well, he'd walk from Salinas to Lastville before he'd climb up on one of them. The only way you could get him near one was to grab it about the neck, have someone hold its tail, guarantee it was eighty years old—and maybe he'd come within three feet of it.

He wore a high collar and a shoestring tie, and where he had that collar washed and ironed in Lastville was a mystery we never did solve. Pop gave him three wool shirts for Christmas the second year he'd been working and Sandy tacked them up on the walls of his shack as ornaments. Pop always did have a wild taste. But nothing the boys wore would Sandy put on his skinny little frame; and nothing they did to change him had any more effect than so much whispering in a longhorn's ear. He clung to his shredded breeches, his needle pointed shoes, his pleated shirt and high collar with all the persistency that Pop clung to his last gallon of prune liquor. Tenderfoot he remained, and tenderfoot he'd be till this day if it weren't——

"PRETTY" MORGAN came riding into Lastville on a hot summer afternoon. He was six feet two and a half inches in his socks, had a face like some Greek Apollo, could swing a six-shooter into action quicker than a lizard blinks his eye, had a meaner disposition than a barbed steer, and chucked every job he got before he'd worked six months. Pretty Morgan he was called; loved liquor, dice, women and horses. To his face they called him Pretty; and some of us took his measure by the silly grin that edged over to one side of his mouth every time they called him Pretty. He was vain, cute—and dangerous. With the women he was a tall broad shouldered he-man of the West. To the boys he was someone to watch carefully. To Sandy he was a pest of the first water, a "demned cow nurse" and a poor customer.

Down from the Three-Bar came Pretty. He'd thrown up his latest job, drawn pay and was rearing up on his hind legs to get full o' moon and pay his respects to old man Sadly—and his daughter.

Sadly ran the dancehall in town, and if there was one thing he respected in that land of sage and heat, sweat and leather, it was his girl Margarite. He gave her the run of his pocket and his heart; she was like a dash of rain, cool and fresh, wherever she went. She was like a sunny afternoon beneath a wide topped tree. She was eighteen, and the prettiest little eighteen year old bundle of delicate girl the calendars could ever hope to imitate. And she had as much use for Pretty Morgan as she had for a dead lizard.

Pretty dropped off his big horse in front of Pop's store and swaggered in. Sandy was asleep near the door. A gentle snore fanned his faded vest and he'd set a can of beans near at hand for the first boy that brought him from sleep with other than a gentle shake. Pretty kicked the chair from under him.

"The dirty steer nurse thet—" He blinked up into Pretty's face and fished for the beans. Pretty grabbed his arm.

"Easy on that right o' yours, Sandy." He pushed the can away from Sandy's fingers. "Got any shoe grease?"

"Olive oil 'll do fer shoes."

"O. K. with me." Pretty had a soft drawl, and the softer it got the meaner his mind was working. "An' you can speed 'er up if y'want to, Sandy. I got no time to spend here."

Sandy took his time. Pretty was a light customer, anyway. If the account ran under forty dollars a year, Pop advised no credit. Pretty bought about twenty cents worth a month.

"Thet'll be one buck, Pretty."

"Whyinhell don't you use a gun?" asked Pretty. "I on'y want enough t' grease my boots."

"One buck," repeated Sandy. "Ef yuh don' want it, don' open it 'n I c'n

sell it over again." He started back to his chair.

"Listen, you," it was a soft drawl, a sweetly velvet whisper, "Listen, you. I've had plenty o' your lip. You wanta be damned careful the way you sling your independent shell around. I'll skin the little hide offen you, shrimp!" He threw a dollar on the counter and leaned down to pour oil over his soft leathered boots. "An' you c'n tell Pop he'll have t' look for a new imitation of a man if he don't teach his peewee clerk some respect t' customers."

Sandy was asleep. Apparently he was asleep. In his mind, behind the closed eyes and the quietly peaceful face he was recalling the endless lip he'd taken from one Pretty Morgan. The humiliation and the insults. Pretty had taken some measure of his rotten disposition out on him every time he'd come in the store. If it was not kicking the chair from under him, it was tossing four quart tins of tomatoes across the room on top of him. And with an easy calm Sandy took it all. He was half the size of Pretty, afraid of horses, timid and unbroken to the ways of cowmen. With quiet and simple statements he answered the insults Pretty gave him—and now, apparently asleep, he took another. It was quite a scoreboard he kept, and another mark went down on it.

From Pop's place Pretty crossed the road and entered Murphy's bar. The saloon was deserted. A frosted mirror, fly specked and smudged, reflected a disappointed row of pop bottles, sweet syrups and cigar boxes. Off to one end of the room, battered cue in hand and a wet cigar drooping from the corner of his mouth, Pete was playing solitary pool.

"'Lo, Pretty."

"How's your jackass, Pete?" Pretty sauntered toward the table. He tilted back his cream colored Stetson and picked up a pool ball. Pete didn't answer; with painstaking care he squinted down his cue, stood up straight and looked shrewdly at the left hand end pocket. He took up a square of chalk from the rack, and all the while intent on his pocket, slowly rubbed it over the tip of his cue. With studied care he leaned over the table, drew the cue back and forth several times over his extended hand and made a sudden stroke. He missed cleanly.

"Damn," he said quietly.

"Amen," said Pretty.

The bottle was brought and drinks poured. Pete filled two glasses with dirty water, threw down his drink quickly and with furious haste shot the water after it.

"Two bucks a quart, Pretty. I'll take it now an' what you don't use I'll put up t' carry."

Pretty threw him two dollars and took the bottle off to a table in the corner of the room. That was the way he'd proceed to get full. Always buy a bottle, insist the barkeeper take the first drink, and then carry it to some quiet corner and start in draining it. And he could hold a considerable amount. In cold weather they say he could drain three pints and walk a straight line. But in hot spells his capacity dropped to a quart. And when he'd put a quart down, cold or not, he'd always want more—that was his main trouble.

Pete went on playing. Except for the sudden click of pool balls and Pete's frequent low voiced "Damn," there was a dead quiet over the place. Pretty rolled a pool ball back and forth across his table and in between took drinks. The two of them were silently intent on their respective pleasures. Their interest in each other amounted to a quart of hard liquor and two silver dollars.

THREE miles out of town, in a stucco villa, Margarite was putting on her boots. Unbelievably small they were, with a fine red embroidery at their tops and a beadwork running across the instep. Her voice faintly echoed over the quiet house, through the great living room with its scattered magazines, its strong rough walls and warm rugs:

Nita, Juanita, Juanita—
That's the Spanish for 'I want to eat!'

and it was like a gently echoing beauty, throwing the gay song with a soft melody down over the lazy afternoon.

In the yard her pony was being saddled. Old Pedro, her father's former bouncer, devoted slave of Margarite and scarred veteran of uncountable saloon brawls and battles, took tobacco and papers from his shirt pocket and called out, "She's waitin', *Chiquita.*"

Margarite tripped down the wide yard, a picture of exquisite freshness and beauty. There was a light spring to her step and a perpetual smile on her small red lips.

"*Gracias,* Pedro. Tell dad I'll be back at four, if he gets in before then." She mounted and whirled off through the big gates, out on the wide road toward Lastville perfectly secure atop her mount. She was raised, as her dad would say, "on ponies, dogwood and alkali."

"WHO'S that's come in, Pete?" Pretty turned about. The liquor showed its effect; there was a dull thickness in his speech and his eyes were widened till they were almost round.

"Sadly's kid, Pretty."

"Well, well, the hell! Jus' who I wanta see." He climbed out of his chair and leaned for a moment against the wall. "'S damn' stuff's poison, Pete."

"I drink it all the time, Pretty."

"Well," he started toward the door unsteadily, "y'r gut's cast iron an' y'r taste's the same as a lizard's!"

"Don't mention it, Pretty." Pete was still squinting along his cue, leaning over the table.

Pretty turned about. He was getting ugly. His hand rested on the butt of his six-shooter. "Y'ain't gettin' sarcastic, Pete?" It was a soft drawl, a purr.

"Not a-tall, Pretty. Statin' facts."

"Y' can spit 'em somewheres else if it's the same to you, Pete." He lurched and caught himself against the porch post.

Across the street, a little apart from Pretty's pinto, stood a black and white pony. He looked from the horse to the store and back again. "Sure 'nuf," he murmured. "Sure 'nuf, she's there." Heavy of foot and lurching badly he made it through the doors of Pop's place and stood blinking in the shadows.

Sandy was behind the counter wrapping a package. Margarite stood with her back to Pretty, playing with Pop's tomcat. She didn't look up.

"'Lo, Margarite. Y're jus' the one I wanted t'see." He sat heavily down in Sandy's chair and kicked the inside door shut with his foot.

Margarite turned and looked him over with a cool smile. "Drunk again, Mr. Morgan?" Her voice held a light sarcasm. "And I suppose out of work?" She guessed the last.

Pretty smiled. His eyes were heavy lidded. "I ain't so drunk's you think. An' maybe you ain't feelin' so cool's you talk." He stood up and walked toward her.

She started back. Her eyes were suddenly angry. "Don't get funny, Mr. Morgan. Dad'll pump you full of holes if you start anything with me. I think you know that."

"Nev' min' y'r ol' man, li'l pretty. 'S you I'm aimin' t' do business with." He grabbed her hand and started to pull her to him.

"Look out, Pretty!" Sandy's voice sounded like a slim whip cracking over a sudden silence. It held something that no one had heard before, a soft swiftness of tone that reminded you of a copperhead's tongue darting out from its mouth. Even toned, malicious, intent.

They both were startled. Margarite looking at him with a vague bewilderment; Pretty amazed to hear so much as a peep from that butt of his crude jokes and bitter tongue. He laughed shortly. "Shut up, you shrimp." He dropped Margarite's hand and leaned over the counter. "Keep y'r trap closed, damn you." Pretty was mad. He'd become considerably warm with the liquor, not to mention this interruption. That little Sandy Snicklebritches, tenderfoot and greenhorn should have the insulting front to dispute Pretty Morgan was flooring! "I'll pump y' full, by God——!"

"You'll do what, Pretty? Let's hear thet all over again." Sandy had come from behind the counter and stood a few feet from Pretty. His face had grown suddenly white about the lips and there was a narrow coldness in his eyes.

Pretty stared at him amazed. "Say, what in hell you tryin' t' put over? Y' mean y'r goin' to take *me* on?" Incredulous surprise was in his voice, a stupefied look on his face.

Margarite had hurried to the front of the store. One hand on the door's handle, she stared at them; at Pretty, leaning against the counter, and Sandy with his shoestring tie falling down on one side and his little thin face looking grim and steadily at the big man in front of

him. His arms were lightly folded over his breast and one thin leg was advanced in front of him.

"You'll set back on thet cussin', Pretty. The lady don't like it. An'—" his eyes narrowed slightly, the same gritty intent came into his voice—"you c'n let up on them filthy names o' yours. My ears don't care none for 'em."

"Now don't start trouble, Mr. Morgan." Margarite was worried. She noted the nervous drumming of Pretty's fingers on his gun butt. "It's all over; let it pass. And thank you, Sandy—but there'll be no need to start a fight."

Sandy didn't notice her. His voice was low and even, cutting his words off quickly. "I've quite a few scores against you. I been here four years an' all thet time you been thinkin' I was takin' your demned insults and lip. But I ain't. I been measurin' you for the yellow pup you are. I hate the way you look and the way you walk. I hate your dirty yellow streak, and I hate——"

Pretty struck for his gun. Quick as a cat Sandy dived sideways, pulled from his vest and drilled clean through Pretty's left shoulder. Then next caught his wrist coming from his holster and dropped him and his gun. Just two shots, their reports echoing and re-echoing around the little store, and Sandy was walking cool and deliberately to the counter. His every step spoke satisfaction.

"An' now what else c'n I do for you, Mis' Sadly?" he asked. The package he was wrapping when Pretty entered he picked up and handed to her. "Your dad's credit'll be good without you signin'."

"But——"

"Never mind him." He adjusted the gun in its jacket beneath his arm. "I'll see thet he gets some rags an' water." He closed the door softly behind her and looked down on Pretty, squirming about the floor and trying with all his strength to get his gun in the left hand.

"You won't need thet, you." Sandy kicked it out of Pretty's fingers. "Listen. In Arizona you'd last long enough for the first kid with a .22 t' pick you off a fence." Sandy was pulling off his trick collar, kicking off the thin soled slippers. "Bad eggs like you don't last there. They've been killed for less'n what you've got off with ever since I been here—an' it's a damn' good thing I ain't doublin' in murder, or you'd 'a' got what I been known t' give 'em."

He was back of the counter now and without stopping his talk was pulling over his head a thick wool shirt, arm bands, cowhide boots. "You're one o' these yaller pups thet'll steam off to the women an' pull y're show gun out t' perform for the visitors—but y're plain low skunk when it's man t' man." He took off the battered cap and set a wide black Stetson on his head. Over the shredded gray pants he pulled a pair of blue jeans.

"An' if I'd 'a' been so minded I'd 'a' put one through thet pretty cheek o' yours—but I figger it's the only thing y' got thet'll mark you for what y' are, a playboy for fool women an' a bluff t' keep the Mexicans where they b'long." He strapped a long revolver about his hips, drew over his shoulders a thick wool jacket and started for the door. "Y' can give Pop my respects—if y' can scrape up enough guts t' crawl for the door—an' y' can thank Lastville for keepin' a good rope where it b'longs, in a store."

He opened the door and looked down on Pretty. *"Tell 'em Shorty Moore offers the respects!"*

He shut the door behind him, untied Pretty's horse, hopped to the saddle with a born rider's grace, and was off down the road toward Arizona before Pretty had got himself far enough around to see if the outlaw was gone.

Again
W. C. Tuttle
Next Issue

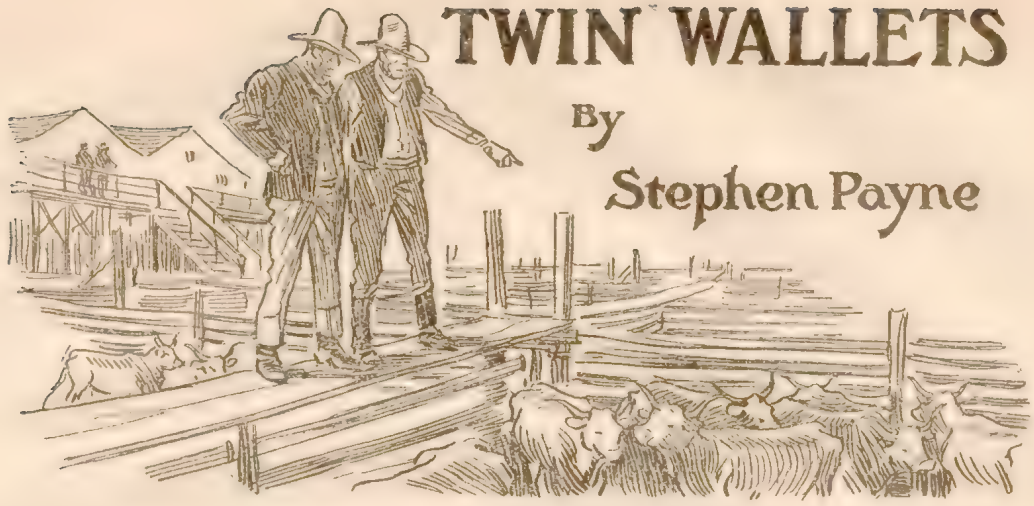
"TUT"

"Gentle
But Firm"
A Short Story

TWIN WALLETS

By

Stephen Payne



Author of "Ananias Valley," etc.

Hickety-Hike Allison figured to block a doublecross when he went along with Twister Cassel and the beef shipment money. He did—but the doublecrosser ran into a triple-cross, and Hickety-Hike found himself caught where explanations were no help at all.

THE stock train grinds to a halt. Squintin' outa the caboose window, I sees nothin' but darkness and a brakie with a lantern. However, my smeller tells me it's South Omaha, my destination; for the muggy air is double charged with an odor unlike any other in the world, the combined scent from stockyards and packing plants.

A switchman accosts the brakie. "What you got this time, Jim?"

"Sixty-nine loads of cattle and sheep and one load of hogs," says the brakie, indicatin' the caboose with his lantern as he utters the word "hogs." Evidently he don't discriminate any between the cattlemen and sheepmen occupyin' said caboose.

Zeb Perkins and Twister Cassel joins me with their warbags and prod-poles in their hands.

"Well, well, rub the sleep outa yore eyes and shake a hoof, Step-and-a-Half," says Perkins, givin' the words his customary slurrin' inflection and applyin' the smart-Aleck monicker which he's seen fit to tie onta me, 'count of the peculiar way I walk ever since a muley steer butted full tilt into a corral fence, inconsiderate enough not to wait until I had time to remove my leg from between his head and said fence.

I never did cotton to a feller as makes sport of another man's infirmity, and I likes this Zeb less than not at all. He's a beady eyed, dish faced hombre with the disposition of a buffalo gnat. Bein' from the same range, he, Cassel and I have stuck together thicker'n thieves all the way down from Dagget, which is our loadin' point.

Twister Cassel's a florid faced, brown mustached feller, built on the order of a Hereford bull. As his nickname tells, he's a bronc fighter, and rumor has it that he ain't none too persnickety 'bout what brand's on the hoss he straddles. However, nothin's ever been cinched onta him, and he's a pretty agreeable travelin' companion. Hossthieves is nice sociable cusses when they ain't workin' at their perfesh. Just now he's shippin' the entire herd of cattle belongin' to himself an' his partner, Rube Hardin.

Back in Lobo County, where the three of us hails from, the boys calls me Hickety Hike Allison, for two reasons; the first bein' my gait; the second, my favorite yell at the dogies, which same I've been punchin' steady during the past several years for Dan McKay, owner of the Four-Up-And-Four-Down. I'm in charge, as shipper, of two loads for him now, and it ain't wholly by chance that I'm in the company of Twister Cassel. No, I had to do some schemin' and use more tact and words than a politician to induce McKay to let me throw two loads in with the Cassel-Hardin cattle, trail with them to Dagget and accompany the shipment to market.

The reason back of my action may prove just a foolish suspicion, but I'm

playin' the limit on any hunch I get which might result in my gettin' on the good side of Cole Lampman. Y'u see, in all the twenty-three years of my life I ain't entertained one serious thought concernin' the future until I meets a nifty hoofed little thoroughbred named Bessie Lovejoy. But it 'pears she needs somethin' to call home 'sides a saddle and a tarp' covered bed. Seems that I'll have to accumulate some possessions before I can slap the ring brand onta Bessie.

Times ain't so good 'mongst the cattlemen; and prognosticatin' 'round on my quest for somethin' with a roof over it and land around it, I gets hep to three hundred and twenty acres on the Beaver, with stock and fixin's, and the debt ridden hombre what owns it is jus' pinin' for somebody to take it off his hands for half its value in cash.

Said cash is as plentiful with me as pines above timberline, but I've jus' gotta have that place; so I hies me to old Cole Lampman, whose business is lendin' money. He's a lanky old grouch, with a dyspeptic look, a crusty manner, and plenty of cash, which he don't entrust to no bank. He lost one hundred dollars and twenty cents in one once, an' rumor says that he now has his creditors pay him in cash—no checks for him.

Comin' outa his door at my hail, he growls, "Well?" and his bushy eyebrows draws down like thunder clouds on a mountain.

I states my case, stressin' my worth and my needs. From then on he takes the deck and deals off the bottom. Have I ever done one thing to show that I deserve to be set up in business? No. Have I ever shown myself to be worthy of being helped? No! I learns that I'm a happy-go-lucky, thriftless, irresponsible cowpoke with nothin' in my empty head except a perfect mania for puttin' up a job on somebody. And he's got powerful strong suspicions of who 'twas that took his white pony away from the hitch rail in front of Widow Gunlick's house one dark night and tied a white cow there instead.

"I didn't tie her," I ventures. "I'm the one as saddled her, and seein' as the widdy doctored up your injuries when the cow unhossed y'u, and 'twas thus that y'u won her, y'u orter *thank* me! I'm splainin' 'cause I knows y'u likes fellers t' tell the truth."

He favors me with a hostile glare, steps back into his house and slams the door. That slam slams all the hopes I've got of a future.

Bessie's sympathetic, but plumb hard 'bout this home business. McKay can't help me any. Fact, nobody 'cept Cole Lampman's got any money, and I guesses he ain't got any too much, for he's ordered Cassel and Hardin to put wheels under their entire herd of cattle, seein' as his mortgage is overdue.

I speculates about that. In our country everybody knows everybody else's business, and I knows Cassel and Hardin ain't got one thing. They rents the place where they hangs out and trades around. It's sorta funny that Lampman ever backed 'em on the cattle. Won't Twister be carryin' the proceeds from that shipment of cattle—round three hundred head—back from Omaha in cash? Course. Cole asks for his payments in cash. Now, s'posin' Cassel should take a notion to skeedaddle with that sum of spondulicks, what's to prevent him? Nothin'. S'posin' again that somebody'd figger jus' like I'm doin', and take a notion to rob Twister? If a waddie named Hickety Hike Allison's on hand t' prevent either of them happenings, won't old crab Lampman sorta 'preciate it?

I GRABS my hat and telescope and ambles after Twister and Zeb, who're leadin' out 'crost line after line of railroad tracks all lighted by a mornin' stars that's tired out and 'most ready to knock off. Presently we reaches the Exchange Building, whose swingin' doors is never locked. Perkins turns to the right and climbs a stairway. He's consigned his three loads of cattle to a different firm than Cassel and me. We goes down a dim corridor and enters a door marked "*Brooks Bros. Live Stock Commission Merchants.*"

Although it's only five by the clock on the office wall, Frank Brooks of Brooks Bros. is settin' on the table readin' a paper. A big, well fed, clean shaven man with a hearty handclasp and a genial manner, he makes us to home t' oncet, while his rapid fire tongue clips out sentences faster'n a barber can ask questions.

"Market's off. (Course, always is.) Heavy runs this fall. (Always are.) Hard on the cowmen. What you got,

Allison? Fat cows. They'll sell well, if they're prime. Hard to move 'em if they're lumpy, gutty, or warmed up. You and Hardin got mixed stock, eh, Cassel? Some beef steers, some stockers and feeders, fat cows, wet cows, canners, calves, veals, bologna bulls. You bet we'll sell 'em. There's a buyer on the Omaha market for every class of cattle on earth, alive or dead. Sure thing, we'll have the feed and water in the pens for 'em. Your stuff'll be up from the chutes about eight, boys. Take it easy. I'm going out in the yards."

You see, when you get to the market you don't have a thing to do with your cattle any more, unless it is to answer the brand inspector's questions or tell the commission man to use his own judgment, that he knows best when he reports to you that he's got a bid on your stuff of a dollar a hundred pounds less than you ever thought you'd have to take. You just walks 'round on top of the fences, smokin' a big cigar an' tryin' to look prosperous while you looks over acres and acres of cattle pens cut by alleys and cross alleys, with here and there a scales house in their midst. While over at one side is the great packin' houses with viaducts leadin' upward and into them.

Up the alleys from the unloading—also loading—chutes, surges cattle and more cattle, empty flanked, hollow eyed from their long railroad journey. Thousands of 'em—beef in the makin' and beef on the hoof—fillin' the pens that were filled and emptied the day before.

"Yhoo, yhoo, yhoo, hip! Yhoo, yhoo, yhoo, hip!" sounds the yells of the stockyards' punchers. Hurry 'em! Hurry 'em! Get 'em out of the alleys—into the pens. Sort 'em! Sell 'em! Through the alleys and over the scales with 'em, and they're gone from your sight and ownership. Grass beef, canners, veals, to the packin' houses; feeders, stockers to the great corn belt.

The fences swarm with men, half of them carrying whips which brand them as traders. Down the alleys clatter men on horseback, carrying whips—commission men and buyers, matching their wits in the battle of trade, speaking a jargon expressive and pithy. And over it all King Barter holds sway.

Cassel and I finds the Brooks Bros.' block (allotment of pens) and perches on the fence, where at about eleven Zeb Perkins joins us.

"My stuff's sold," says he, lookin' down his nose. "Top cows brought four cents. Weighed ten nine. They're all mortgaged," he continues. "I couldn't get a cent, not even expense money. They's gettin' all-fired persnickety 'bout turnin' every cent over to the party that holds the paper nowadays. Huh! I ain't hardly enough money to get back home. It's sure a hard game."

"Tough luck," Twister replies, twiddlin' his brown mustache thoughtful. "We don't get nothin' for all our work, either. All the proceeds'll go to Lampman. That reminds me, I want to buy a wallet."

Zeb and I tags along with him as he goes over to the store section of South Omaha, where the keenest traders on earth lurk in wait for hombres like us, almost draggin' us into their stores and forcing us to buy things we don't need. Twister is onto 'em. He haggles, and finally purchases, for fifty cents, a red leather bill-fold about seven inches by four, marked two and a half.

LATER, when we've eaten dinner and are loungin' in Brooks Bros.' office, Zeb excuses hisself to go to his commission house, and I, taking a notion to buy a pair of socks, wanders over to the same store where Cassel bought his wallet. Just as I'm about to enter, I see Zeb paying for a bill-fold exactly like the one Twister purchased. His back is to me, and I draws a long breath and backs out hurriedly. What's he want with a wallet? He's said he had no money. Why didn't he get it when Twister got his? I wonders if he'll show it to Twister.

He doesn't, or even mention it when the three of us are together in Brooks Bros.' office once more. I decides to keep quiet. Frank Brooks comes in, places his whip in a corner, slips outa his muddy boots and puts on his shoes.

"All cleaned up on you fellows' stuff," says he. "The bookkeeper'll have your sales sheets made out in a minute. Come in my office a moment, Allison."

Inside his private office, he says, "McKay sent us no instructions. I suppose the money goes to the Cheyenne bank as usual?"

"What if I'd ask for it in cash?" says I.

He shoots me a quick look. "I wouldn't give it to you. McKay's cattle are mortgaged. If I turned that money over to you and anything happened, we'd be held liable."

"That so? Well, I certainly don't want to carry it. But you'll turn the proceeds from mortgaged cattle over to Cassel?"

Brooks frowns, and liftin' a paper weight, looks at a letter. "That's different," he says. "Here's a letter from Cole Lampman authorizing, in fact ordering, me to do just that. Say, Allison, what ails that crazy old codger? I don't like this a little bit. Bank drafts are safe. Cash isn't."

"He figures just the opposite, I guess," I answers.

Brooks drums on the desk with the paperweight. "With times like they are and cattlemen going broke right and left, men that you think are honest sometimes change over night," he says, thoughtful. "I think Lampman's a fool. However, this letter puts us in the clear, and it's none of my affair. That's all, Allison. I'll send McKay's money to Cheyenne."

A few minutes later Zeb and I are both watchin' as Brooks calls Twister to the cashier's window and counts out nine thousand in big bills.

"It's a lot of money," says Brooks. Zeb and I and Cassel are all pretty tense faced. We think so, too. "Now, this all goes to Cole Lampman; don't it, Cassel?" Brooks continues.

Twister nods. "Every cent."

"Such being the case," Brooks proceeds, "I'm going to wrap this wad in a paper and seal it. It'll be less noticeable that way." He lays the bills on a piece of brown wrapping paper and folds it around them.

"Good idea," Cassel allows. "I'll hand the old boy the package jus' as she comes from you."

"Yes. And I'll seal it." Brooks turns to a desk, opens a drawer and produces some sticky paper, his back toward us for a moment. Then Cassel receives the package with slightly shaky hands, and placing it in his new wallet, puts that in his inside vest pocket.

"Sign this receipt," Brooks requests.

Twister does so. "We'll get our contracts converted into tickets and drift out of here on the midnight train," says he.

Which is what we do, Zeb and I stickin' closer to Twister than a newborn colt to its mother's flank. However, Cassel makes no suspicious move whatever, and when we reach Dagget in the evening a few days later it looks as though my unauthorized shadowin' will end in bein' just that.

We have left our saddle hosses in the livery stable so as to ride back home, but it is too late to start, and at the hotel we get a room with two beds in it. Then we start out to see the town, Zeb allowin' that it's high time we had a little spree. All the way to Omaha and back and not drunk once! That won't do at all. His credit's good at two saloons, and he starts out to make the party a stemwinder.

Twister's leary at first; but as three or four drinks warm his blood, he throws caution to the wind. Somethin' tells me to keep steady. Zeb's generally one awful tightwad, and he's too apparently tryin' to get me and Twister dead drunk. I notices him renegin' on the stuff when he thinks we ain't noticin', and I thinks of that billfold exactly like Cassel's which he's never showed. His manner's a lot nicer toward me than usual, and he urges me to drink frequent and constant. I certainly have to do some sleight-of-hand tricks with my glass, but I manages to keep steady while pretendin' to be three sheets in the wind.

THUS 'tis that at about eleven Zeb, with a box of cigars he's bought at one saloon under one arm and me hangin' to that arm, and his other arm supportin' Cassel, gets the two of us almost by main strength up the single flight of stairs and into our room at the hotel. Cassel manages to tuck his coat and vest under his pillow, then flops on one bed. I does another flop onto the single bed. Zeb observes us critically, with a grin of triumph warpin' his ugly dishface. He's feelin' pretty good, but not the least shaky, I observes, while I groans and grunts and snores, keepin' time to Cassel's heavy rumble.

Sure that we're both dead to the world, Zeb extricates Twister's coat and vest from under the pillow, and removin' the red wallet, places the one exactly like it back in Twister's pocket, then stuffs coat and vest back under Cassel's head. His next move is to open the box of cigars which he'd laid on the

table. Removin' its contents, he places Twister's wallet in the box, then fills it with cigars, throwin' the extra ones out o' the window. He seems in doubt of what to do with the cigar box, but decides to leave it in plain sight on the dresser, as he crawls in beside Cassel.

"Pretty slick," thinks I. "Evidently he plans to ride right along with us back to Lobo County, cache the money and stay around, actin' jus' as always until all the hubbub dies down."

The proper thing for me to do is wait until Twister's sober, then accuse Zeb and prove my charge; but my love of a prank gets the best of my better judgment. Won't it be the biggest, gosh awfullest joke ever played on smarty Zeb when he opens his cigars and finds nothin' but cigars in the box?

Before the others are awake in the mornin' I goes out, purchases a box of cigars exactly like Zeb's and ties them in my slicker behind my saddle. I have no chance to make an exchange until noon, when we stop at a roadhouse for dinner. There I takes a sudden sick spell at the table, which ain't to be wondered at, considerin' the whisky of last night, and rushes to the barn.

Zeb's left his cigars in his saddle pocket, and it's a matter of a very few moments to exchange boxes with him. I goes right back to the house feelin' much better. My hunch has been right in at least one respect. At Cassel and Hardin's place I'll hand over the wallet and tell 'em. They'll tell Cole Lampman, and he'll change his opinion of Hickety Hike. Course we won't have anything on my enemy, Perkins, except the satisfaction of thwartin' him.

I'm feelin' even better humored than Zeb, who seems plumb elated 'bout somethin', as we resumes our journey. Cassel's recovered from his jag, and havin' several times assured himself that his wallet's safe, he also is in high spirits. Joggin' along leisurely, we reaches the top of Fox Gulch Hill, in the timbered mountains, on the last lap of our homeward ride.

There a tall man with a black hat pulled over his ears, and a bandanna hidin' every other part of his face except his eyes, steps out from behind a tree, barrin' our path and pointin' a pistol the size of a cannon straight at us. He's dressed in miner's hobnailed shoes, bleached blue overalls and a faded brown shirt. His brief orders is spiced with frequent "By gobs" as he lines the three of us up with our backs to him, removes our gun belts, then goes through our pockets, informin' us that if any one o' us makes one move he'll plug, first, the one he happens to be searchin'.

Upon gettin' the red leather wallet from Twister, he drops the small plunder he's taken from me and Zeb, and shovin' this last find in his hip pocket, he takes our gun belts, mounts Twister's hoss, and hazin' mine and Zeb's ahead of him, disappears up the road toward Lobo County.

Cassel is plumb thunderstruck and all broke up. "The money! The money!" he mutters. "Who'd ever a-thunk it! Robbed! I don't know what me and Hardin'll ever do. How'll we ever pay Lampman? Serves him right if we can't ever pay him. He'd no damn right askin' a man to carry that money in cash." And he breaks out cussin'.

Zeb's steppin' all over his upper lip. In fact, he acts as if he'd been robbed. "Takin' our bronc's is the last straw," he mouths, vowing vengeance.

As for me, I've got a big hope that Mr. Bandit'll abandon our hosses. Surely he won't bother with the slicker tied behind my saddle.

We hoofs it up the road as fast as we can, me laggin' a little 'count of my limp, which cause Perkins to shoot it into me again in his deridin' manner. I aches to flatten his face still further. A mile, and we comes upon our broncs tied by the road.

I gives one look. My heart races, then I goes sick all over. My slicker's gone. Zeb, on the contrary, does a war dance of joy as he hauls the box of cigars outa his saddle pocket and offers me and Twister a smoke. It's all I can do to keep from knockin' them out of his hand. Why the blue blazes couldn't the cussed bandit have taken *them*, instead of mine? And all our guns is gone.

"That bandit's comin' back this way was done for a blind," Twister allows. "He's circled and headed for Dagget, likely. What we goin' to do?"

"We can't do a thing without guns, and it's really the sheriff's job," I spouts. "But, by jinks, I'm a-goin' t' grab that bird!"

"Woo-hoo, hoo!" cackles Zeb. "Jus' listen at Step-an'-a-Half! Yuh'd think

he was the one as was robbed. Hoo-hoo, ain't he fierce?"

I strangles a wild desire to tell Twister what I'd seen that dishfaced gnat do, for it suddenly smites me with terrific force that, without the cash to turn over to Twister, I'd have hard work explainin', and come to think of it, would my explanation be acceptable even if I did have it?

"Well, yuh flag your kite for Lobo and get the sheriff," says Cassel. "And Zeb, will you go get Lampman while I'll go to our place and get Rube ready? You fellows burn up the earth and meet us at our ranch."

"Jake!" says I, and spurs my hoss. By fannin' the breeze I'm headed back from Lobo with the sheriff in an hour and a half.

Roggon's his name. He's a big, fleshy lunker with a bullet head, pig eyes, a gruff voice and plumb self satisfied manner. He's sure glad some excitement's come up. Ain't been much doin' since he was elected. He's itchin' to show folks they's got a sheriff as will get results. Hope to die if he ain't. And he believes in treatin' 'em rough. He'll third degree 'em if they don't come clean with him. Yep, an' he's the law. He don't need the backin' o' the court to enforce it. "An' yuh three cottontails let one man hold yuh up? Yuh all was armed, too? That's sure a lully-coola. Hope to die if it ain't!"

AS WE nears the Cassel-Hardin place, Cole Lampman and Zeb Perkins joins us. Cole don't look any more displeased with everything on earth than usual, but Zeb's disgruntled yet plumb-on-the-prod manner lets me know that he's investigated his box of cigars. I can't help grinnin', and he sees the grin. His teeth grinds, and he gives me a dirty look, his beady eyes full of suspicion.

Reinin' up in the yard, we hears a fearful row goin' on in the house. Rushin' to the door, we sees Twister and Rube all tangled up, a-fightin' jus' like bobcats. They've been goin' it for several minutes, for the room is a scrambled wreck. Now Rube, who's a big, swarthy faced, black mustached hombre, gets Twister down and clamps his throat.

"I'll get yuh! Yuh damned double-crosser!" he snarls, oblivious of our presence.

Roggon and I drags him off Cassel. "Hey, yuh, cut out this comedy stuff!" Roggon grunts. "Purty mess yuh birds has made o' yore li'l nest. Hope to die if it ain't! Now, what's all this scrap 'bout?"

"None o' yore dang' business!" Rube grits when he can speak.

I gives Twister first aid, a drink of whisky. He can't talk—he's so choked—and he's surely taken one awful beatin' before Rube got him down.

"I suspose," rumbles Lampman, glowerin' around, "that Rube's sore because Twister allowed himself to be robbed."

"Yuh hit the nail on the head!" Rube Hardin nods, emphatic. "Danged hunk o' mush to let hisself be held up."

"Cuss him, he wouldn't believe me," Cassel sputters, gettin' hold of himself and flashin' the queerest look imaginable at first me an' then Zeb, but there's murder in the glare at his partner, Rube.

I've always heard that they got along well together, but now they're lovin' each other like a pair of tomcats.

"Well, yuh've been robbed, and that's all they are to it," Roggon allows. "So now, yuh fellers, fergit yore squabble an' come along with me. I'm deputizin' the bunch of yuh. We'll go right back where that 'ere bad man left yuh fellers' hosses, pick up his trail, foller him and get him. Hope to die if we won't!"

"Ain't that simple?" sneers Zeb, clickin' his tongue against the top of his mouth. "It's pretty nigh dark, and all we gotta do is pick up the bandit's track, foller him an' get him."

"Let the sheriff handle this," Lampman barks.

So the six of us take the back trail. Reachin' the place where our hosses had been left, Roggon sets us to ridin' circles around it in a search for tracks. I'm chosen to accompany him. We find no traces of the bandit, which ain't to be wondered at, for the ground is dry and rocky as well as timber-covered. Fox Gulch runs parallel to the road at our right, and the sheriff and I drop down into it. Almost at once we come to a tunnel in the hillside.

A hoss is tied in the little clearing before this tunnel; and as we approach, a tall, gray whiskered, hawk eyed old fellow comes out of it and blinks at us.

For a moment I pay scant heed to him, for tied across the back of the saddle on the hoss is a slicker, one which I'd know among a thousand. Mine! And hung over the saddle horn are three belts with holstered revolvers. Roggon sees them.

"Stand jus' as yuh are!" he roars at the miner. "Yuh're under arrest. Huh, yuh never thunk Sheriff Roggon'd be along so doggone quick, did yuh? Allison, let out a couple o' war-whoops an' fire a couple o' shots t' bring the rest o' the boys in."

"Under arrest? What the hell are yuh talkin' about?" yelps the miner as I emits the whoops and fires the shots as directed. "By gobs, I've been workin' back in the tunnel all afternoon. Jus' gettin' ready to go to my camp, 'bout a mile down the gulch. Say, yuh damn' fool, what yuh pointin' that gun at me fer? Don't yuh know who I am?"

"Sure." Roggon dismounts, advances to his prisoner, orders him to put his hands behind his back, and snaps handcuffs on his wrists. "Yuh're Sam Hodges, but that don't help yuh none. Yuh're nabbed with the goods, old boy. Hope to die if yuh ain't! Pretty doggone foxy, ain't yuh? Diggin' this tunnel an' a-stickin' right here atter yuh pull the job, 'stead o' flaggin' yore kite. But I've slipped up on yuh afore yuh had time t' cache the plunder."

Hodges cuts loose a string of profanity that'd make a muleskinner sit up and take notice. I unties the slicker with shakin' hands. Ha! My box of cigars is there! But I ain't time to hide them before the other four of the posse thunder up. Zeb's eyes stick out, borin' into me as he sees the cigar box. I can almost hear his teeth gnash. I don't need tellin' that the sight of that cigar box exactly like his own makes him certain that I've tricked him.

"Got him!" Roggon explains to the bunch. "There's yore guns. Them cigars your'n?" to me.

I nods and mounts my horse with the box in my hand. Hodges stops cussin' and gapes at the posse, the guns, the slicker, the box of cigars.

"Mebbe yuh locoed nuts'll tell me what it's all about?" says he, proddy but bewildered.

"Where's the money?" Cole Lampman wants to know. "This man answers the description; don't he boys? A tall man, hobnailed shoes, bleached overalls, faded brown shirt, black slouch hat."

Cassel and Zeb nods. "Sure it's the bird," says Roggon. "He's jus' throwed this plunder on his hoss to ditch it some place. He wa'n't 'spectin' me. Now then, let's get to the bottom of this. Hodges, whar's that money? Nine thousand dollars, wrapped in brown paper, inside a red leather wallet. Come through!"

SAM HODGES goes hog wild, violently jerkin' his arms as much as the handcuffs will permit, his grey beard stickin' out, seemin' to bristle as he cusses everybody. He knows nothin' about any of this stuff. Money? Wallet? What the blue blazes? Say, is somebody tryin' to hang somethin' onta him? By gobs, he'll bleach the bones of the son of a pirate that tries that.

"Hang somethin' onta yuh? I'm a-goin' to hang *yuh* if yuh don't spit out where that roll is, an' doggone quick," Roggon growls in his best third degree manner. "It's one dead mortal cinch yuh stole it. I'm the sheriff of Lobo, and I'm atter results. I makes my own law, Sam Hodges. I'm agoin' to make Lobo County safe fer a man t' tote ten dollars 'round in his pocket without bein' stuck up. Come clean, pronto, or I'm goin' to make one example of yuh!"

Sayin' which, Sheriff Roggon drops the noose end of his rope around Hodges' neck and tosses the other end over the limb of a tree. The rest of us exchange startled glances. Hodges ceases rantin'. He's scairt, but speechless with fury.

Cole Lampman, his grim face hard as rock, says, "Boys, I'm backing the sheriff in this. I want that money. Come, you dirty crook, where is it?"

He edges his hoss around and, picking up the loose end of the rope, takes a turn 'round his saddle horn.

"I'll sure have the law on yuh fer this," Hodges gurgles. "I'll—I'll——"

"Two minutes t' tell whar at it is, or we stretches yore neck," Roggon cuts him off, haulin' out his watch.

The faces of Cassel and Hardin are as tense as Hereford bulls about to clash with each other. Zeb Perkins has a sort o' half mockin' sneer on his lips. I open my mouth to tell where the money is,

close it soundlessly. My joke on Perkins has landed me in a pretty pickle, and Perkins will damn me utterly. How on earth can I explain the money's being in my possession? They'll all swear that I stole it from Cassel. Ah, later I'll go straight to Cole Lampman, turn the money over to him, tell him the truth and take my chances. At least he'll have to admit then that I'm honest. I'll wait. Hodges will surely tell what he's done with the wallet. No, he *can't!* Because it wasn't him that robbed us! That bandit's eyes were a deep brown, almost black. Sam Hodges' eyes are a faded blue! What'll I do?

"One minute!" rumbles Roggon.

Hodges, his old face blanched, simply glares defiance. But what's the matter with Cassel and Hardin? In the seconds when they ain't lookin' with horrified wonder at the man about t' be hanged, they're snarlin' at each other with their eyes and lips, like dog and cat about to tangle.

"Time's up!" Roggon snaps his watch shut. "H'ist away, Lampman!"

Cole Lampman hoists. Sam Hodges, kickin' frantic, swings clear of the ground.

"Stop!" the word leaps from Twister Cassel's lips like a pistol shot. "Stop! Rube Hardin's the coyote that robbed me!"

Lampman drops the rope, spurs his hoss 'round to face the partners. Hodges plunks to earth and sits up stranglin' and sputterin'. Roggon pivots, his eyes poppin' out and his jaw droppin'.

"Why, yuh double-crossin' skunk!" Hardin mouths, and he's out of his saddle and upon Cassel in one panther-like spring. With a snort of terror Twister's hoss starts pitchin', landin' ten feet away. Two jumps quicker'n you can snap your fingers, and Cassel and Hardin's both thrown, breakin' apart as they hit the ground.

Sheriff Roggon leaps between them. "Now we'll get to the bottom of this," his voice booms as Twister and Rube bounce to their feet in his grip, his arms spread wide holdin' them apart.

"He done her!" Cassel shrills. "I foun' out when I got home. I wa'n't squealin', 'cause he was my pard, but I can't see no innocent man hung. Course he planted this evidence. The clothes he wore—hat an' all—is at the house. He didn't have time t' burn 'em. But —cuss him!—he's hid the money. They wa'n't nothin' in that wallet but a package of p-a-p-e-r!"

"Yah, squeal on me, would yuh? I'll fix yuh good an' plenty, Twister Cassel," Rube snarls. "Paper? Yah, they was paper in that wallet 'cause this dirty skunk has cached the money an' put the paper in it. He's the thief! They wa'n't no money!"

"She was jus' as I got her in Omaha," Twister yammers. "Rube's hid that money. I catched him with the goods, 'cept for the cash. That's what we was scrappin' 'bout. Make him come across, Roggon. He's plumb rotten!"

"What? Yuh think yuh'll hang somethin' onta me, Cassel?" Hardin bellers. "Wal, I guess not. Lampman, Roggon, this double-crossin' walloper planned fer me t' hold him up an' we'd divide the swag. I done my part and there wa'n't no swag. There, Twister, I reckon that makes yore nose a heap smuttier'n mine. I ain't stole nothin'. He's the damn' thief. Let me at him. I'll make him spit out where at 'tis."

"Yuh liar, yuh liar! I never planned nothin'," Cassel hisses. "I'll——"

"Steady now, yuh boys has slung 'nough mud at each other," Roggon interrupts. " 'Pears yuh're both bit by the same dog. Now I'll jus' clamp the bracelets onto both o' yuh, an' then we'll start this thing off from the beginnin' an' get t' the bottom of it. Hope to die, if we won't."

Then somethin' else takes my attention, and all of it. It's a gun pokin' me in the ribs. Zeb Perkins, takin' advantage of the excitement, has eased his hoss 'round beside mine.

"Hand over that cigar box, yuh sneak thief," he hisses.

DREAM fast, I thinks he's goin' to run for it. It's almost dark. He's ridin' by long odds the fastest hoss in the bunch. In this timber he'll be out of sight in the wink of an eye. Now or never the chance I've sought to protect Cole Lampman's money. Zeb's on my left side, a little behind me. The box of cigars is in my right hand. I'll have to half turn to hand it to him.

As my arm comes around in a half circle and Zeb drops his bridle reins to grab the box in his left hand, I spurs my bronc fearful and reins him sharp

around. He pivots in one lunge around Zeb's hoss's head and crashes against his right side. I'm out of my saddle and on Zeb. There's the roar from his revolver as my leap knocks him out of his saddle. Then we're both in the dirt, all tangled up—the cigar box lost in the shuffle.

Zeb samples my ear with his teeth. I knead his bread basket with my knee. Then he rips the shirt from my back, and I tear out a handful of his hair. Over and over we roll. Crashin' against a tree, I'm knocked silly for a second. Zeb straddles me and picks up a rock to smash down on my head. Afore he can do it, I reaches up with one leg and hooks a straight shanked spur in his neck, right under his chin. He goes backward at my downward tug, and my hands grabs his frantic kickin' legs. Staggerin' upright, I heaves him from me. He lies quiet for a second, and here's Roggon a-holt o' my shoulder.

"Now, what's the meanin' of this? I've got one hell of a posse! Hope to die if I ain't."

I'm payin' no attention to him. I'm lookin' for the cigar box. Evidently when I dropped it to grab Zeb a hoss had kicked it, for the box is smashed, the cigars is scattered all over, and starin' us in the face is a red leather wallet. Cole Lampman sees it.

"What's this?" And he swoops it up.

"The money!" yelps Twister, his eyes jumpin' outa his head. "There! There's the thief! Roggon, arrest Hickety Hike!"

"What the—" gasps Hardin, wrenchin' at his handcuffed hands.

"Huh?" grunts Roggon, clampin' down on my shoulder.

Lampman glowers at the wallet, at the paper wrapped package inside it, at everybody, but mostly at me. "So!" Just one word, but that somehow damns any explanation I can hope to make.

Zeb Perkins sits up. Seein' Cole with the wallet, he staggers to his feet, blurtin', "Guess I stopped Allison's game. Uh-huh, Lampman, this damned Step-and-a-Half feller was tryin' t' beat it with the swag. I was layin' fer him."

I twists outa Roggon's grip and dives for Zeb. I gets in one good lick afore the sheriff can nab me again.

"That'll be plenty from yuh, Allison," he says, shakin' me like I was a little kid, he's that strong. "'Pears like the hull bunch of 'em is crooks, Lampman; but now that we've got the money, we'll get to the bottom of this."

"Yes, I hope so," grunts Lampman. "Because I refused Allison a loan, he retaliates by trying to rob me. Fine citizen. But how'd you know he had it, Perkins?"

"Don't believe any of his lies, Mr. Lampman," I spouts, and tells what I'd seen Zeb do, and why I took the wallet from him.

"Step-and-a-Half's the liar!" Zeb yelps. "'Twas me seen him swipe the money. Seen him hide it in his box of cigars, yeh!"

"One or t'other of them purps sure done it," Cassel blurts.

"Yah, yuh try t' skin outa it," Hardin explodes. "It's a sure thing they wa'n't nothin' in the one I got, but I'll bet my last dollar yuh're in on this deal. If them cigars hadn't got split, yuh three birds would 'a' been settin' pretty."

Roggon wags his bullet head sagely, and Cole Lampman addresses himself to Perkins. "Look here, Zeb, your keeping quiet when we were about to hang Hodges don't look very good. Why didn't you expose Hickety Hike and disclose the whereabouts of the cash long ago?"

"Why, I—why—" Zeb's at a loss for a second, then he blats, "Why, yuh see I was givin' Step-and-a-Half a chance to come clean; but when I seen him gettin' ready to make his sneak, I up an' jumped him. 'Sides, them pards acted plumb s'picious t' me. I was waitin' to find out who the second thief was, which same we has. Due to me, we've landed three crooks, and the money's safe."

"Whoa, now, back up a little. Where do I come in?" Roggon wants to know, jerkin' his head. "I guess I gets some credit for these 'ere captures. Say, Hickety Hike, if they's any truth in what yuh say, why didn't yuh spit out what yuh knowed an' turn the wad over long ago, huh?"

I MAKES a stagger at the explanation, but my answer lacks convincingness.

Zeb sneers and snaps his fingers in derision; but Sam Hodges, who has kept silent in the midst of the general clamor, now rushes to my aid, "I believe Hickety Hike!" he shouts. "Yuh two was a-

watchin' Cassel and Hardin, but I seen the start of the scrap 'tween Allison and Perkins. Yep, Hickety Hike went up ag'in' Zeb's gun drawed on him, an' crawled his frame. Hickety wa'n't a-makin' no false move. Zeb was a-tryin' t' glom onta that cigar box. By gobs, Allison didn't let him git it. Say, yuh sheriff, take these bracelets offen me an' 'member this—I'm sure goin' t' make her hot fer yuh."

Perkins dismisses the miner's statement with a shrug of his shoulders. Roggon, holdin' me by the wrist, goes to Hodges, removes the handcuffs and slaps them onto me. "Seein' as how I got this case all cleared up by threatenin' to lynch yuh, Sam—course I wouldn't 'a' gone through—yuh orter be gosh a'mighty proud to have been such a help," the sheriff remarks. "Yep, I sure got results. Hope to die if I didn't. All straightened out now. Twister and Hardin and Allison is all guilty. We got the thieves an' the money. Didn't take Sheriff Roggon long t' get to the bottom of it."

"Bottom of what? What's straightened out?" Lampman growls. "Nothing's straight or clear. Cassel accuses Hardin. Hardin accuses Cassel. Perkins and Allison accuse each other. Hardin accuses the other three. Which one stole what? Who's lying? They say there's another wallet somewhere. Say, wait a minute—have we got the money?"

He hauls the bill-fold out of one pocket and his knife out of another. His long, bony fingers tremble as he cuts the brown paper wrappin' on the package. Every eye is upon him as from his suddenly nerveless fingers sheets of brown paper the size of bills flutter to the ground.

Little gasps from the onlookers, then stunned silence. Perkins' strained yelp breaks the spell. "Paper! Hickety Hike's tricked us all!"

"Oh, shut up!" Cole Lampman roars. "Thieves! Thieves! The whole bunch of you! Roggon, arrest Zeb Perkins also. To jail with them all! There we'll sift this thing out from the very start!"

"Yes, sir," replies Roggon, producing yet another pair of handcuffs and putting them on the protestin', sputterin' Zeb. "Yuh come 'long as a witness, Hodges. We will get to the bottom of it. It's a dang' queer case. Hope to die if it ain't."

Dang' queer case! That's what I think. It's what I'm still thinking two hours later, inside a cell at the Lobo jail. Fortunately there are four cells, so no two of us are together, for we'd certainly fly at each other's throats. Each one of us suspects the other three —for what, oh what, became of the *cash?*

Here I never wanted to do right so much in my life, and I'm in the worst pickle of my life. Bessie'll hear of it. That'll queer me with her. And as for getting on the good side of Cole Lampman——! Even if I escape a prison sentence, I'll be disgraced and branded as untrustworthy. Gone all my dreams of the future—no home, no Bessie, no nothin'.

HOWEVER, I'm not left alone with my misery for long. Half an hour after the cell door has closed behind me, here comes Cole Lampman with Roggon and Sam Hodges. Sayin' nothing, the sheriff leads me to his office and removes the handcuffs.

Lampman turns up the coal oil lamp and faces me 'crost the table. "Allison," he begins, gruff as ever, "several days ago, when you came to me for a loan, you mentioned that I owed my happy marriage to the prank of a cowboy. All unwittingly you hit the nail on the head. The night when you substituted a white cow for my pony in front of Mrs. Gunlick's house, she'd refused me. In the dark I mounted the cow, which threw me. The widow, fearful that I was seriously injured, realized that I meant something to her and capitulated.

"After you'd gone that day, I saw the joke from an entirely new angle. Boys ought to be full of the Old Nick; there's nothing worse than a mollycoddle. I made inquiries and found that you were keeping company with a mighty fine girl. McKay spoke well of you, and your frankness impressed me favorably. The truthfulness of an applicant is the biggest factor with me in making a loan. Which brings us to this rummy mess of today. No, don't say anything yet. When I get your answer to two questions, I'll know all I need to."

I stare at the money lender in wonder

as he produces a letter from his pocket and resumes.

"Since we reached town, I got my mail. This is from Frank Brooks. I'll read a part of it:

Dear Lampman: I'm sending a draft for the nine thousand to the Lobo County Bank to be credited to your account, and I don't care a hoot whether you like it or not. You see, I talked this matter over with Hickety Hike Allison, who, I know, is a reliable youngster, and we considering it risky to send the cash, decided to switch packages on Cassel at the last minute.

Cole Lampman looks up, his stony eyes seekin' mine. I scarcely see him, for things are whirlin' in my head. Into my chaotic thoughts his words intrude once more.

"It appears, Allison, that you helped to safeguard my money by advising Brooks to send a draft, which events have proved was the wisest and safest thing to do. This letter releases you from any theft charge, for you knew all the time that Cassel carried only paper in his wallet. Yet, why did you say nothing of this, and why did you go against Zeb Perkin's gun to defend a cigar box? Sam Hodges says it was the nerviest thing he ever saw." His implacable old eyes seem to bore into my head like augers.

Ah, here is an undreamed of chance to square myself. The future dawns rosy just as quick as I tell two plausible lies. That's the devil of it! Have I got to explain my acts by lies? Yes, to make myself solid with Lampman, for he now thinks that I knew where the money was all the time, and that my advice to Brooks insured its safety. If I invent passable answers to his questions, he'll continue to think so, whereas if I tell the truth, he's almost sure to think as he did before receiving the commission man's letter—that I fully intended to rob him myself.

Brooks must have thought that he told me his plan. Anyway, his letter gives me the chance to jump out of the frying pan of suspicion, but I'll have to lie. Have to, for my future's at stake.

"Well?" queries the money lender, impatient at my long delay in answering. "Dan McKay told me you were a square shooting kid, but there are some mighty funny angles to today's play."

Something snaps in my brain. McKay's said I was a square shooter. So I am. Lookin' Cole Lampman in the eyes, I perform what I consider the bravest act of my life, although it is an altogether different test of courage from that of physical struggle.

"Mr. Lampman, Brooks did not take me into his confidence. I took what I thought was the money from Perkins to trick him and to protect you. Owing to the second holdup, I landed in a predicament I couldn't explain. Believing the box of cigars contained your money, I defended it. That's the truth, and you can think as you damn' please about my intentions."

Silence in the office. Roggon's bullet head nods back and forth, back and forth. Sam Hodges sucks loudly at an empty pipe. A smile cracks Cole Lampman's wintry face.

"Bully for you, boy; bully!" he ejaculates. "For I now know that you've told the truth all the time. Yes, I lied, to try and trap you and to test you. You see, Brooks says nothing in this letter about having told you what he intended doing."

As I do nothing but gawk at him, Lampman continues, "Suppose we go over to the restaurant and get a feed while we talk over that loan you spoke of the other day?"

SNOWBLIND GULCH

By

Eli Colter and Black Wheeler

Authors of "The Glommers," etc.

The high white snows are cruel to those who do not guard against their glare. Sometimes they serve to reveal the souls of men, as when the stricken Mert Clossett found refuge with Billy Ish. And sometimes—as when Mert plotted coldblooded murder—their cruelty is that of implacable justice

AWAY out in Colorado it lies, on the western slope of the Rocky Mountains, lonely in the deep wilderness. It is a short gulch, a gash between granite cliffs; isolated, lost to the regular haunts of men. The old placer miners who first worked it out and deserted it bestowed upon it the unpoetical name of Bobtail Gulch. But it isn't Bobtail Gulch any more. It acquired a new name; a name not so banal in sound, a name poetic enough for the most critical—Snowblind Gulch.

"How're the eyes this morning, Mert?" Billy Ish turned from his cooking over the decrepit stove stationed in one corner of his cabin, and faced the man sitting on the double bunk across the room.

"We-ell, they seem to be a little better—but damn' little! The lids are glued together so I can't see a thing out of 'em." Mert Clossett scowled as he swung his legs out of the bunk and groped for his corduroy pants. "Reckon them hot cloths yuh put on 'em durin' the night musta helped some," he added grudgingly, as he pulled on the pants and picked up his heavy high topped shoes. Having finished dressing he rose and began to grope his way across the room, halting finally and snarling in baffled rage, "Now where in hell's that wash basin?"

"Here you are, Mert." Ish caught one of the thick hands and led the blinded man to the bench standing against the opposite wall. "You better wait till I get you some warm water and a pinch of salt."

Mert Clossett was not an attractive figure as he stood waiting for his enforced host to prepare the water. His wide, red veined face was set in a perpetual scowl. The corners of his mouth drooped sullenly. His brows grew together over red rimmed, bandaged eyes set too far apart. His snub nose glowed red, testifying to the fact that its owner was no teetotaler. He made no attempt to curb his surly temper, muttering a curt thanks and jerking the bandage from his face as Ish poured warm salt water into the basin. As he bathed his face the solution seeped between his inflamed lids, stinging sharply, and he cursed with a good deal of feeling. The scowl on his face deepened as he dried on the towel, replaced the bandage and groped his way to the table.

"Well, what'll it be this morning?' Ish inquired jocularly. "How'd you like grapefruit, quail on toast, French fried spuds and——"

"Huh!" Mert cut in shortly. "I'll take flapjacks and coffee, or coffee and flapjacks, don't matter which way yuh put it, with a little bacon on the side—seein' that's all yuh've got. And git a move on yuh, Billy. I'm as hungry as a wolf."

Ish made no reply as he slid three hotcakes onto Mert's tin plate and covered them with syrup from a half gallon can. He added two generous slices of bacon—all he had left—and cut the

whole into sizeable mouthfuls, then turned on his heel and went back to the stove. As he again bent over his cooking he began cheerfully humming to himself:

"Oh, dem golden slippers,
Oh, dem golden slippers,
Oh, dem golden slippers I done laid away——"

"Huh! Seem to be feelin' pretty good this mornin', Billy," Mert broke in, jamming his fork into a mouthful of hotcake. "Bet yuh wouldn't be whistlin' and singin' if yuh was in my fix."

"Well, I'll bet I would!" Ish retorted, his impatience at Clossett's continuous complaining temporarily getting the upper hand. "At any rate I'd do my best to be cheerful and thank my stars I wasn't in a worse fix! You ought to consider yourself one lucky hombre, Mert. You was as good as dead when I picked yuh up yesterday, and yuh would be dead right now if I hadn't been huntin' and run into yuh. And here yuh are, alive and hearty—just laid up three or four days with them bum eyes."

"Huh." Mert grunted grumpily as he swallowed another mouthful of hotcake. "That ain't the p'int. What makes me so sore is that I'm gonna lose a lotta money on account of bein' laid up right now. This is the last day of December, ain't it? And I oughta been in Monarch las' night at the latest. Tough luck, I calls it, bein' holed up and tied so I can't turn a wheel, right when I had the world by the tail."

"Yeh? How'd you have the world by the tail?" Ish grinned as he replenished Clossett's empty coffee cup. "And how's bein' laid up gonna spoil yer chances?"

"Why, the time runs out on that claim at midnight, yuh pore fish! It's a cinch some other guy'll hop onto it now afore I can git there."

"Claim? What claim's that?" Ish stopped short and glanced back at Clossett as he replaced the blackened coffee pot on the stove, his eyes narrowing in sudden suspicion.

"That there claim old man Davis has been putterin' around on fer the last two or three years," Mert replied tersely. "It's gonna be worth a lotta money some day—ain't no other way to figure, 'cause it's the extension of the Iron King. But they's a lot beside me knows how vallyble it is, and somebody 'll have it relocated first thing in the mornin'."

"That's where you're wrong." Ish turned a pancake and his lips tightened grimly. His suspicion had been correct. "You ain't got the right slant on these guys around here. There ain't a man in camp who'd relocate that claim! They'd shoot square with Uncle Jimmy Davis, and make it mighty hot for any man who didn't. They all know darned well Uncle Jimmy didn't get his assessment work done just because he was laid up with the rheumatiz all last summer."

"Well, what's that to me?" Mert demanded truculently. "I didn't give the old geezer the rheumatiz, did I? His ground's wide open after midnight. 'Tain't my fault he didn't git his assessment work finished on time, and I got as good a right to jump that claim as the next guy!"

"As good a *legal* right, yuh mean." Ish repressed the angry denunciation that rose on his tongue, and began taking up his hotcakes.

It would do no good, accomplish absolutely nothing, to reprimand Mert Clossett. Accident and another's imperative need had thrown Mert in his way, forced him to receive that other as guest and patient till his sight should be restored. Courtesy demanded that he ignore Mert's personal failings and tender him the best his cabin could afford, so he shelved the subject and sat down to his own breakfast. His meal was meager, since Mert had devoured all the bacon, but he ate it with healthy relish.

"Yuh goin' over to Monarch anyways soon, Billy?" Mert leaned back in his chair and lit his pipe. "If yuh are, I reckon I better tag along, even if I can't see. I can hang onto yer coattails in the bad places."

"I'm going tomorrow. Gettin' short on grub, Mert. Yeh, you better go along and see the doctor," Ish agreed, continuing with his breakfast. He finished his meal in silence, rose, washed up his few dishes and prepared to get to work, while Mert Clossett leaned back in his chair and puffed at his pipe.

IN LESS than an hour Ish was hard at the business of reducing some specimens of ore with pestle and mortar. Mert listened for some time

in silence to the steady, monotonous *thump, thump, thump,* then cautiously twisted halfway round in his seat. Lifting a hand ostensibly to rub his forehead, he slyly raised the bandage a half inch from over his sight and squinted at Ish. For sufficient reasons of his own Mert was feigning more damage than he had suffered. He had no intention of letting Billy Ish discover that already the snowblindness was passing, that already he could see fairly well again.

"What the heck yuh doin', Billy? Poundin' up some samples?" he asked, playing up the assumption that he was totally lacking in sight. Ish replied with a brief assent, and Mert went on with apparent attempt to be sociable, "Must be free millin' stuff, then. What do you figure it'll run? How much of a vein yuh got?"

"Oh, I guess there's a foot or more," Ish replied carelessly, shooting a glance at his unwelcome guest. His mouth set firmly as he went on with his work. He'd heard too much about Mert Clossett's underhand principles, and seen enough since the other man had been precipitated into his affairs. He had no mind to give Mert the truth of things concerning his strike. "It's too darn low grade, Mert, to pay for working. I guess the vein'll average about ten bucks a ton."

"Huh! I should say it was low grade!" snorted Mert. "Half ounce ore ain't worth hell room over here! Yuh might make better wages out of it if yuh had a stamp mill on the ground."

Ish assented casually and went on with his pounding. Mert, apparently having lost all interest in his host's low grade proposition, resumed his smoking. But all day he watched Ish from between half closed lids. The young miner kept steadily at work, pausing occasionally to pan the powdered ore in a cooling tub he had brought from the blacksmith shop. Behind those half closed lids Mert Clossett's eyes soon discovered Ish's lie, and began to gleam with covetous greed. Every time the younger man washed out a portion of the pulverized ore, a heavy string of gold lay across the bottom of the pan, which Ish promptly placed in his poke, little dreaming that Clossett was watching his every move. Instead of being low grade, the strike he had made was so rich that his worries were settled, his winter's grubstake assured.

As evening approached and Ish put by his work, Clossett placed a hand on his eyes, groaning in simulated misery, and made a casual announcement. "I've changed my mind about goin' over the hill with yuh Billy. I'm afraid the sun might come out and put my eyes on the bum again. The doc told me if I got another dose of snowblindness it'd put me out fer keeps, so I'll just lay low and keep washin' 'em with that salt water. It seems to help 'em some."

"So?" Ish looked quickly across the room, wondering where and when Clossett had conversed with any doctor concerning his temporary blindness, knowing he couldn't have been within miles of a physician since the accident to his sight. Nevertheless, Mert had hit upon the truth, and Ish went on speaking with a frown, "Well, it might be wiser fer yuh not to risk it. The eye is a mighty delicate organ. The second dose of snowblindness would put the kibosh on your ever seeing again, and that's no lie."

But he couldn't throw off his uneasy suspicion of Clossett, and he liked not at all the idea of leaving him there alone while he went into Monarch for grub. True enough, Mert couldn't do much by way of getting a haul out of the vein in that length of time, and there was nothing around the cabin Mert could lay hands on but his rifle. However there was nothing else to do but go. He couldn't work unless he ate, and he had barely enough food left for breakfast and to last Clossett scantily till his return.

THE next morning Ish made ready to start across the range, scrutinizing Clossett out of the tail of his eye. Mert cannily kept the bandage in place, groaned now and then about his smarting eyes, and when Ish signified that he was prepared to leave, asked idly, "Reckon yuh won't be able to make it over and back in the same day, eh?"

"Not with a jack load of grub on my back, Mert." Ish buttoned his mackinaw tightly and jammed his cap flaps down over his ears. "I've got to bring in enough to last me the rest of the winter. We ain't had enough snow yet to hide a jackrabbit, and that looks bad. When she does come she'll be a hell-

roarer, and I reckon the ball's due to open pronto if not sooner. It's dark and gloomy and spittin' snow already. But I oughta make it by four o'clock tomorra afternoon if I don't tumble off the trail into Devil's Canyon, stumble into a prospect hole or get buried in a snowslide. I tell yuh she's gonna be snowin' like hell inside of an hour." Ish pulled on his mittens, reached for his packsack and swung it to his shoulder, and started toward the door.

"I shouldn't wonder none," Mert agreed. "Looks to me like yore takin' long chances strikin' out over the range at this time of year. If yuh're right about that storm, and she does come while yore across the range, how'n the devil yuh gonna git back?"

"On webs," Ish replied succinctly. "I gotta pair in my packsack. And I've got to take the chances since I'm outa grub. Oh, I'll make it, storm or no storm. So long, and be good!"

"Yeh. By the way, don't say nothin' in Monarch about me bein' here." Mert groped his way after Ish and paused in the open doorway. "I'm kinda on the dodge. Don't want anyone to know where I am till I git shet of that ol' hellcat who's suin' me fer divorce an' alimony, ste? Why, that ol' battle-ax even attached my wages over to Summit, which is why I pulled my freight outa there in the night. I'm gonna stay under cover till the thing's settled."

"Sure, I savvy." Ish shifted his packsack on his shoulder and started down the small flat surrounding the cabin. "That kind of a woman can raise the devil with a man if she sets her head to it. Don't worry, Mert. I'll not give yuh away."

As Ish swung ahead and disappeared in the conifers clothing the hillside across which the trail angled, Mert shoved the bandage from his eyes. It gave him the appearance of wearing a turban with a mat of sandy hair sticking up through the top. With a satisfied grin he closed the door, returned to his seat and resumed his smoking.

For several moments he sat frowning and thinking hard, devising ways and means with which to rid himself of Billy Ish. His glance strayed to Billy's rifle on its deerhorn supports over the mantel. He stared at it, shook his head and spoke aloud, "Nussir, that won't do. If they found the body with a hole in it, in the spring when the ice goes off, they'd nail me sure as God made little apples. Nope—I got to dope out a safer way. Ha! I got it!"

He rose with alacrity, donned mackinaw and fur cap, shoved his feet into protesting arctics and went from the cabin. Out in the yard he searched till he found a board about a foot wide and three feet long. He turned it over, eyeing it with a grin. "Huh. Little ice on it now, and it'll sure do the trick. Gotta be good and slippery, though."

He stepped inside the cabin, dipped the board into the cooling tub, threw it out dripping wet, stepped outside again and rubbed the surface of the board against the snow. Huh! Be froze in no time a-tall. Slippery? Rather! A moment or so later he was following Ish down the trail. The first swirl of snow, heralding the swiftly approaching storm, darkened the sky and protected his damaged sight as he plodded up the first steep grade. Ish, traveling faster and having the advantage of several moments start, was already far out of sight. Which was exactly what Mert Clossett wanted.

"Wisht I coulda figured on some way of gettin' rid of him without wastin' that pack of grub he'll have on his back," he grumbled as he jogged on. "Still, I'll have plenty of time to hike over to Tin Cup and git a new supply where nobody knows me."

A half hour later Clossett had reached his objective, the most dangerous point in the trail along Devil's Canyon. The Canyon itself was appropriately named, a deep cleft in the hard granite, hewn out by the devil himself, apparently, for hellish purpose. It was three or four miles long, with almost perpendicular walls averaging a hundred feet in height and with a roaring mountain river filling its bed.

Since there was no room in the bottom for the trail, the early day placer miners who had made that tortuous path had run it angling across the right hand bluff, taking advantage of all available depressions and shelves. The walls were so steep and the trail so narrow that the going was extremely dangerous. A single mis-step was almost certain to result in a death dealing fall through a hundred feet of space, onto the boulders which filled the narrow gorge and

through which the river rushed with the speed, force and roar of a cataract.

MERT had been over the trail before on his way from Monarch to Summit. He knew every foot of it. He knew exactly where he was going and where he would stop. He came to a halt where the trail made a sharp turn around an out-thrust ledge of granite. There it was perilously narrow, nothing but a fifteen inch shelf cutting into the rocky point. Carefully Mert knelt and laid his board lengthwise across the trail, one side of it resting against the extreme edge of the shelf, and the other side against the cliff propped to a slant on an eight inch slab of rock. He covered the board with a good inch of snow at the top of the slant, filled it to a level at the edge, and heaped snow along the trail to cover the ends of the ice coated slab of pine.

Then he rose, backed off a step and surveyed his work with a nod of satisfaction. The snow concealed board was undetectable. The carefully placed covering seemed merely a slight rise in the trail. But that rise was three feet and a half long. It would be impossible for any man coming down the trail to step clear over it, he had to plant at least one foot squarely on it. And when he did, his shoe would sink through the deceptive snow, strike the slanting ice slick board and pitch him over the edge of the cliff. There wasn't a protuberance of rock, not a limb of shrub or tree that he could grasp to save himself. Mr. Billy Ish, returning tomorrow, would find himself battered to a grisly death on the boulders in the bed of treacherous Devil's Canyon.

With a last glance of gratification, Mert Clossett turned back down the trail, taking no care to cover his tracks by stepping in those Ish had made. The rapidly thickening snow would cover every sign of a track long before nightfall. Besides, Mert was eager to ascertain the value of Billy's claim. Reaching the cabin, he paused to secure a shovel, and turned to follow the trail Ish had made leading to the open cut in the hillside. Here Mert stopped, scrutinizing the place where Billy had done his latest work. The cut was six or seven feet deep and half filled with snow covered rock and dirt.

"Huh!" Mert grinned craftily as he stripped off his mackinaw and prepared to do a little work himself. "Thought he could fool me or any other guy that happened along while he was gone, eh? Fired a shot in the wash above the face of the cut to hide the vein! Thought he was right smart stallin' me about low grade ore, too. I wan't born yestiday, Mr. Ish!"

He picked up the shovel he had brought, took a firm grip on the handle and began heaving out the mass of dirt and rock. He labored at top speed for something like forty minutes, not halting to rest till he had cleared out the débris in the cut and exposed the breast. Leaning on the handle of the shovel he allowed himself a minute to puff and blow, then bent down to examine the breast he had uncovered. The lower three or four feet of it was in solid formation, save for a wide ribbon of iron stained quartz cutting through the gray porphyry "country rock."

Mert's red rimmed eyes lit at sight of the vein. "I knowed it. I was damn' certain he'd struck a gen-oo-ine fissure vein. Pay ore, if I know anything about it! The mother lode that all that placer gold come out of that them fellas found in the gulch below here!"

Mert struck his pick into the vein and pried out a large piece of the quartz. As he leaned to pick up the specimen his eyes lighted upon a two inch seam of hard grained gray quartz hugging the footwall. He caught his breath and stared. A streak of regular jewelry ore! No wonder Ish had been singin' and whistlin' like he'd got money from home! Why, a man could make a stake outa that stuff in a week or two, just poundin' it up in a mortar and pannin' it! Wires of gold runnin' every which way! Worth forty to fifty bucks a pound, somethin' like a hundred thousand to the ton! No wonder Ish had lied and kept his secret to himself. Low grade! Huh!

Mert rose to his feet, donning his mackinaw and shoving the rich specimen of rock into his pocket. The next thing to do was ascertain whether or no Billy Ish had got his work done on the claim. The law required a ten foot hole, a hundred dollars' worth of work done and the claim recorded within ninety days of the posting of location notice. Failing this, the claim was legally open for re-

location at the end of those ninety days.

Mert climbed the hillside to the location stake Ish had driven into the ground above his cut. Kneeling in the snow he bent his gaze upon Billy's notice, written in lead pencil on a space hewn off with an axe. Mert wasted no time reading the notice, Ish would be certain to make it out in proper form. All that interested Mr. Clossett was the date on that stake.

The date was clear. The twenty-seventh of October. Huh! Mert's eyes sparkled craftily as he went ahead inspecting the other prospect holes pitting the snowy hillside to right and left of the discovery hole. Not a ten foot hole on the claim! Not a sign of a survey stake! Obviously the claim wasn't on record, and would be wide open for relocation ninety days from the posting of the notice. Mert paused to permit himself a broad grin. The ninety days were nearly up, not quite a month more! And Billy Ish would shortly be smashed to a jelly in Devil's Canyon.

"Well, reckon I'll jest pitch in and git the claim surveyed immejitly. The snow'll be so deep in a coupla days more that surveyin' will be outa the question. Let's see." Mert paused judiciously, and frowned in deep calculation. Like most men who spend their time alone in the wilderness, he had acquired the habit of talking to himself; a habit that clung even when he walked the streets of a town. He went on slowly, thinking aloud. "I'll go right after it today and git her surveyed. I'll keep inside and rest my eyes tomorra and give Mr. Billy Ish time to take a little slide inta Devil's Canyon. Next day I'll mosey over to Tin Cup for some grub. Reckon I can dig up enough dust around the cabin to buy all the chuck I need. Then I'll come back and pound ore myself till the ninety days is up. And on the twenty-eighth of the month I'll hike over and record my claim. Kinda evens me up for losin' my chance at ol' Davis's strike. Good enough! Good enough!"

Without further time spent in cogitation he went to work surveying the claim and driving stakes into the snow crusted ground, while the storm increased, whirling white flakes about his plodding figure, swiftly deepening the blanket on earth, darkening the sky and protecting him from the glare that had lately blinded his sight.

THE next morning Billy Ish started up the six mile climb to the top of the range. Fulfilling his prophesy, the storm had been a hell roarer, depositing several feet of fine snow on the mountains and all but obliterating the trail. He was forced to travel slowly and carefully, compelled to restrain his impatient eagerness to get back to his cabin and ascertain that all things were as he had left them.

He was obsessed with a hunch that he had done the wrong thing in leaving Mert Clossett alone on his claim. In Monarch they said Clossett was crooked as a snake and slippery as an eel. Yet Ish didn't see that Mert could accomplish any amount of deviltry in his short absence. The feeling of uneasiness drove him to make the swiftest time possible in safety. The storm had settled, the sky cleared, and the cold sun shone brightly above his head.

Its rays struck the surface of the glittering snow, and sparked to white fire on a thousand crystals in every direction. Warned by the needle pains shooting through his eyeballs, Ish stopped, took out his bandanna handkerchief and tied it around his face below the eyes. The edge of the fold he drew up till it almost reached his brows, allowing him a scant crevice through which he could watch the trail, his sight shaded and protected from the blinding glare of cold white sun on colder, whiter snow. Then he again struck off at all possible speed, crossed over the pass and started down the western slope of the mountains toward Devil's Canyon.

When he reached the familiar narrows of the dangerous trail he slowed his pace and proceeded more cautiously. The snow had less foundation upon which to rest there, less space in which to spread and mound. Piling to all the height the width of the pathway could sustain, it continuously crumbled down and fell into the canyon below, leaving the trail covered only by a varying foot or two of powdery flakes.

Then Billy Ish reached the out-thrust point of granite where Mert Clossett had knelt and worked the day before. It looked no different than the rest of the trail; even the slight rise made by the ice coated board was effectually concealed by the irregularly heaped snow. Confidently, Ish rounded the point of granite, thrust out his webbed snowshoes

—and planted his foot firmly on the treacherous snow. The snow slid down the slippery board, and Billy's foot slipped with it.

He gasped in startled horror as his feet shot out from under him, clawed wildly for a hold where hold was not, and pitched over the edge of the cliff. His heavy packsack scraped the rock and brought a feathery white cloud down with him, but the very drag of it kept him from hurtling out too far into space, pulled him into a straight drop down the sheer wall. Then Billy Ish landed with a bone shaking jar astride a stunted cedar whose gnarled and twisted roots were firmly fastened in the rock's crevice. He caught at the branches frantically, grasping them with the instinct of preservation before thought had time to apprise him of the thing that had saved him. He flashed a look at the falling board, now landed in the river and pitching down the swirling current.

For a full minute he watched it, staring, shaken with horror, then dragged his gaze from the yawning abyss below and tried to take stock of his position. He found himself forced to remain very still on the bending, short cedar, praying that the tough roots would hold, till the first weakness of shock passed and his senses could function normally. Then he carefully surveyed the cliff above and below.

Over his head rose fifteen feet of bare rock between him and the trail. Not a toe hold. Not a hand hold. No ledge to right or left. Hobson's choice. He must go down. He squinted at the face of the cliff under him. There was a chance—if a man had a cool head and plenty of nerve. First he must rid himself of snowshoes and the heavy pack jammed between his back and the wall of rock.

Releasing the death grip he had taken on the tree's branches with his hands, he hugged its gnarled bole tightly between his thighs, removed his mittens and snowshoes, then cautiously unbuckled the strap over his shoulder. Fastening the snowshoes to the pack, he leaned outward slightly and eased the heavy sack into his right hand. Again taking a firm grip on a branch of the cedar tree with his left hand, he swung the pack slowly and carefully outward, aimed it at a clump of stunted trees in the canyon bed at the edge of the river below and let it drop. Too heavy to swerve from its course it fell straight as a plummet and lodged in the trees.

"So far, so good." Ish said aloud soberly. "And that's the least of it. Now how do I get down?"

It seemed an impossible feat, even though he knew himself to be wiry, slim and agile as a wildcat, surefooted as a mountain goat. He wormed up the tree, slipped off it, holding to a hanging branch, and dug his toe into a slight projection of rock. Letting go the tree he hugged the face of the cliff and worked his way down to a meager shelf below. Down, down. Foot by foot and inch by inch. Holding his breath and clinging to the rock lke a creeping spider. Twelve feet from the bottom, clinging to a small bush, exploring the rock beneath for further foothold, he found himself again precipitated into the air as the bush gave way.

He plunged with a splash into the icy river, too rapid to freeze over even in the coldest weather. Unhurt save for a few minor bruises, he struggled to his feet and found the water barely up to his knees. Wading to the copse of stunted trees where his pack had lodged he pulled himself up to it, jerked it down, and again strapped it over his shoulder.

THERE was one way, down the canyon, and he took it. Wading the icy water, fighting the furious current that threatened to hurl him off his feet every time he slipped against a boulder, he forced his difficult way along the canyon bed. By the time he reached the place where the mouth of the gulch in which he had taken up his claim opened into the canyon, he was soaked to the waist and shivering with the cold in spite of the violent exercise his progress had entailed. He swung off into the gulch, sought a place where the bottom widened, put down his pack and hustled some limbs from the conifers to make a fire.

Never without dry matches, thanks to a waterproof matchbox, he scraped away the snow, dug into his pack and pulled some paper from the parcels of food within, piled the dead, dry, pitch coated limbs on the paper and touched a match to it. It flared, caught easily, and in five minutes Billy Ish was hunching gratefully over the warming, drying blaze.

Then he allowed himself to think carefully. The board that had pitched him into the canyon, now. Boards don't go out and plant themselves in treacherous places on trails without aid. One person there was who *might* have discovered the worth of his strike and planned such an apparently indetectable method of getting rid of Billy Ish. One. Mert Clossett. No alternative. Mert Clossett had placed that board there, and Mert Clossett had seen more than he pretended to see the day before. And if he should return to the cabin he would no doubt find Mert Clossett waiting his advent with the rifle from over the fireplace. Once having ascertained the richness of the ore in the vein and having gone that far, Mert would stop at nothing to rid himself of Ish and seize the opportunity to jump the claim.

Billy's jaw squared at a fighting slant, and his eyes flared ominously as he replenished his fire and dug some food out of his pack. He glanced up at the sun. Around three o'clock. It would take him two hours to get thoroughly warmed and dried, to find new strength on a full stomach and be ready to proceed. By then it would be dusk. Night would have fallen before he could reach the cabin. Well, he had no desire to reach it before dark, anyway. He could creep up on the cabin, and let Mert have what was coming to him.

By dusk he was warm, dry and a new man. He picked up his pack, strapped it over his shoulder, and ploughed up the gulch toward home. Night was full and the high moon shedding a faint light on the deep snow when he at last came in sight of his cabin. It was quite dark, no sign of a light. Billy's mouth set in a hard line. Of course it would be dark. Mert was too sly to be caught unaware. Billy pictured him in the blackness, sitting at the window commanding the trail, rifle across his arm, watching intently and never missing a shifting shadow. Well, he wasn't to be caught napping either.

He stole up to the side of the cabin opposite the window, edged around to the door and stood listening. There was not a sound from within. He leaned to the right, caught the latch and whipped the door open, pulling it back against him. Still there was no sound from the interior of the room. Ish slipped out from behind the door, shoved it tight against the cabin wall, edged along it till he reached the opening and took out his matchbox. Striking a match, he held it into the doorway, slowly moving his head over till one eye commanded the inside of the cabin. It was quite empty. The rifle hung in place over the mantel.

Ish stared, frowned, and stepped boldly into the room, lit his lamp and surveyed the cabin minutely. Everything was in place, everything as he had left it save for a few soiled dishes stacked on the table. But there was no sign of Mert Clossett. No sign save the wrinkled, discarded towel that had served as bandage for his eyes. Ish frowned again and walked up to the table.

"Now what the hell does that mean?" he asked himself, thinking swiftly, seeking some answer to the puzzle. "Humpf! I'll bet the damned skunk was so sure he'd got rid of me that he went to work surveyin' the claim and settin' out stakes for himself. He'd figure on having it done before the snow got too deep, and relocating the claim the minute the ninety days from notice was expired. By God, I bet that's it! And the fool's got lost up there on the northern slope! Well, I'll soon find out!"

Ish wheeled from the table, hurriedly divested himself of his pack, and ran out into the flat. He hadn't far to go before he came upon the first of the survey stakes Mert had driven into the hard ground. He kicked it with a ferocious toe, stood frowning into the night and again burst into angry speech.

"No, by God, that ain't it! But I *have* got it now! He must have started his surveying yesterday, as soon as he come back from planting that board to do for me. Then he ran into that northern slope and found he'd picked a devil of a job!" Ish paused and his lips curved in a wry grin as a picture of the northern slope grew in his mind. It lay on a steep hillside, covered with crisscrossed down timber through which a thick growth of young pines thrust their spearlike tops. Nearly a day's work surveying that portion alone. A devil of a job indeed.

"Yes sir, that's it. Sure as hell. And the damned idiot was so crazy to get it done before the snow got too deep that he kept right on going today. Well, that's finished him, all right. The

blamed sun was so glaring that I'd 'a' been snowblind myself if I hadn't protected my eyes. He's out there wandering around somewhere trying to get back to the cabin. Unless he's plunked into a snow drift and frozen to death. Well, this ain't findin' him, standin' here gassin' to myself!"

ISH started down the flat, calling at the top of his voice. "Yah-hoo! Yah-hoo! Mert! Hey, Mert! Where are yuh?"

He paused, listened for an answer, then went on again, calling and shouting loudly enough to be heard a mile away. So walking and hallooing, pausing and listening, he reached the foot of the slope. Then far up on the hillside he heard a faint answering shout. Saving his breath he ploughed through the snow up the steep slope toward it.

He reached the snow covered patch of fallen timber and young saplings, paused and called again. Off to his right Clossett's voice answered, hoarse and frantic with fear. "Billy, is that you? Fer God's sake come and git me. I'm wedged in between two logs, half froze and blind as a bat!"

Ish floundered through the underbrush, young trees and logs, stumbling and falling, picking up again and forcing his way on. He finally came upon the prone figure of Mert Clossett, caught between two big logs, helpless and all but covered with the fine snow. Without a word he slid over the nearest log and bent above Clossett, tugging at his clothing and freeing him at last only by using the most violent effort. Pulling Mert to his feet, Ish began the backtrack through the old tree trunks and bush. Both of them were pretty well exhausted by the time they reached the clearer slope and made their way down to the flat.

Clossett's mind had been racing at lightning speed, striving to decide upon some logical excuse for his being up on that slope and in that plight. He concluded that Ish had in some fashion managed to clear the trap on the trail, and must be utterly without suspicion of any attempt at foul play. The best thing he could do was act as though nothing had happened, brazen it out and let it go at that, since he was snowblind for the second time and utterly at Ish's mercy. He leaned on Billy's arm as they neared the cabin, feeling the level footing of the flat beneath his shoes, and began speaking with a really clever assumption of innocence—to give the devil his due.

"Goda'mighty, man, I'm sure glad you showed up when yuh did. I begun to think I was done fer. My eyes got a little better today and I thought I'd take a little stroll and look over your ground. But the sun was so bright, and I didn't realize I was so——"

"Cut it!" Billy interrupted curtly. "Cards on the table. Don't try to put anything over on me, Mert. I know exactly what you was up to. You was surveyin' my claim and stakin' it out, because I found the stakes in the flat. You was so damn' sure you'd got rid of me that you——"

"Got rid of yuh?" Mert expostulated. "I don't know whatcha mean by——"

"The hell you don't!" Ish shoved him ahead into the cabin and closed the door behind them. "Shut up. I don't want to hear the sound of your voice. I stepped on your damned board and dropped into Devil's Canyon, just as you planned. But others beside the devil take care of their own, and I got out again." Mert's involuntary start and blanching face told Ish all he wanted to know of the other's guilt, and he stepped close, thrust him into a chair and leaned over him. "I'll manage to git yuh into Monarch, then the devil can go on taking care of yuh. You wanted Uncle Jimmy's claim, eh? And you wanted mine? And you was willin' to commit murder to fill your hands with clean gold. Well, the devil's took care of you, Mert! You're blind for keeps. Get that? *Blind!* And the best you'll ever git is sittin' on a street corner in Denver, holdin' out a tin cup to catch copper pennies dropped by the soft hearted!"

Mert crouched in the chair, whimpering, broken, and Ish threw him a glance of contemptuous pity as he began unpacking his stock of grub.

SNAG TOOTH

By John Briggs

Author of the "Cbula" stories, etc.

To Snag Tooth the beaver the most precious gift of nature had become a slowly closing trap of death. And, like all living things, the inevitability of death made of Snag Tooth a creature in whom fear was dead—as the dread otter learned, in the tunnel beneath the ice.

BARELY a whisper of the rushing wind penetrated into Snag Tooth's hutch. The old beaver lay in a corner of the utter darkness. Only the *r-r-r-r-ring* sounds by which the beavers spoke with their tails, indicated that there were others present. But from Snag Tooth's quarter there came no sound in answer—no sound at all, except an occasional squeaky whimper which complained of a dull, insistent agony. Slowly Snag Tooth was starving while his companions fattened on the great store of food logs which had been supplied for winter.

Under Snag Tooth's floor of sticks sounded the gentle *lap-lapping* of disturbed waters. The pond itself lay under a solid covering of ice. After the ice had thickened, the beavers had lowered the level of their pond by digging a drain through the dam, leaving themselves an air space between the surface of the water and the ice roof. Under the ash gray light which filtered through the ice pack, the contented ones were paddling about the pond, making the water turbid with their high spirited clamor. Many were stripping food bark from the community log pile in the center. Others were busily conveying the peeled branches to the dam. But these sounds of familiar activity made Snag Tooth nervous and ill tempered, so that a space about his corner was never trespassed by the other household members.

Earlier in the season, when the first frosts had sprinkled the maple leaves with gold, the pond had been filled by an underground canal leading out of the main stream. Three large huts of sticks and mud stood in the center of this pond. Now the domed roofs of the huts projected up through the ice sheet and glistened under a shell of frozen snow.

But the beaver had no occasion to inspect this outer part of their domicile. Their food pile was plentiful. They had access to it through openings in the floors of their huts. No prowler of the outer world might penetrate their ice locked home; yet under the ice was light and air, and stored food. Snug within their huts, which were floored above the water level, the pond inhabitants were prepared to enjoy a happy period of isolation, free from work and want. Their remarkable engineering feats had earned them the pleasures of this peaceful home life. Their duties comprised the rearing of young in this well planned security.

Only upon old Snag Tooth had misfortune descended. Indeed he was suffering from one of the worst ailments which possibly could afflict a beaver. In felling a timber the previous season, he had lost one of the chiselling teeth from his lower jaw. It had been very painful at the time, but he had forgotten that. It was the constant lengthening of his corresponding upper tooth which finally had brought him to his present state of starvation. For nature had so provided that a beaver's front cutting teeth never should cease growing, since they must resist constant wear in his use of them for felling trees.

Now each day it was growing more difficult for Snag Tooth to peel bark from the food branches and to get it into his mouth. The loss of a grinding surface on one upper tooth had caused that cutter to grow until it protruded past his lower jaw. Only by opening his mouth to its fullest width, could

Snag Tooth manage to peel a little bark for his nourishment, and that was becoming more difficult each day. The odd tooth itself had become a long, bowed tusk, square in front of his mouth. The most strenuous edging and twisting of his mouth, netted him barely enough nourishment to keep him alive.

Snag Tooth's miseries were augmented within his hut by three families of youngsters that were becoming more active each day. The broad, branch floor had become a nursery room for the young that flapped about and rolled and played unceasingly. The suffering beaver spent much of his time crawling up and down the runway through the floor into the water beneath. He had discovered that by digging into the sod along the banks of the pond, he could snag out small roots and manage to suck them into his mouth more easily than he could peel bark.

ALWAYS, while he was thus employed, he was followed by a school of fish seeking the worms which he sometimes dislodged. They had no fear of the beaver, for it was not in his nature to molest them. Numerous fish had entered the pond through the little canal, and they were provided with wood grubs when the beavers peeled the bark from their food logs. Now Snag Tooth was supplying them with more food when he dislodged worms from the bank.

One day Snag Tooth was thus digging near the covered canal which emptied fresh water into the pond. Suddenly he was startled by two little, narrow set eyes gleaming at him from the mouth of the channel. The eyes were set into a roundish, snakelike head. Immediately a long round body, on squat powerful legs, wriggled to the edge of the water. Startled, and astonished at the audacity of the invader, Snag Tooth splashed repeated warnings with his flat paddle tail. Then he dived under to spread the warning to all his mates.

Only the dreaded otter could have spread such alarm in the colony at this time. None but the otter could fight under water, using the beaver's own weapon, drowning. Of course, the otter had been lured to the pond seeking the fish which had likewise come thither seeking grubs and worms, neither of which food articles was found edible by the beavers. So far, that was an equitable arrangement. The otter might remain inoffensive as long as the fish supply lasted. But the young beaver would be equally tempting to his palate. And this the parent beavers knew.

As Snag Tooth conveyed the alarm, a circle of brown noses protruded from the water around the food logs. A muffled thunder of *plop-plopping* tails echoed under the icy dome.

Aye, but the otter had heard such futile warnings dozens of times. If driven to retreat, he could easily slip away from the clumsy beavers on land. And under water, he was as quick as a darting eel. Even in the water, he was much quicker than these pond inhabitants whose natural element was water. Truly he scorned them, ignored their faked up threats. Their noise was all accomplished by a big, flat tail, which could administer a blow, it is true, but one which could scarcely graze the otter's long, snaky body.

His cunning little slant eyes gleamed with steady insolence. By one powerful slash of his terrible claws, he could tear out the eyes of a beaver. His darting jaws could sever a beaver's fat throat. In his daily routine, even, he was quicker than the quickest of all watery beings. He could catch fish. While these lumbering beavers, who plodded and toiled about for their food, he viewed with contempt. They performed mysterious works; they were incomprehensible to him; but even so, they were only big clumsy rats.

The otter came each day when the gray light beneath the ice roof was sufficient for him to snare fish. Each day old Snag Tooth complainingly dug into the root turf about the rim of the pond, and there was always about him a waiting school of fish, ready to snap up the grubs and worms which his industrious paws dislodged. Then slipping like a shadow through the muddy water, would come the otter. He would strike into Snag Tooth's following of fish, seldom missing his quarry. One, two, or three, he would catch and carry away. While this was going on, there would appear above the surface of the pond, a defiant circle of dark quivering noses, watchers, guardians of the beaver young.

Impatience was manifest among Snag

Tooth's brothers. He sensed that he had become an outcast among them. Though he was slowly dying, they were not in sympathy with his sufferings. He had grown to be a menace to their welfare, attracting foes. For where one otter appeared, others might come. They could not plug up the canal inlet to the pond, for the water would then become stagnant and sickly. There would be no air to breathe. The fish would die, and mysterious distress would overcome the householders. Nay, for generations their forefathers had taught them against this indiscretion.

So Snag Tooth was shunned. He was avoided, as one with the plague. He felt the silent verdict which the others had passed upon him, when even his berth in his own hutch never was trespassed. Each day the hostility toward him increased. Each day starvation shrank his stomach, cut deeper between his ribs, and chilled his weakening spirit. Now for so long he had become accustomed to his one great chisel tooth, that he found it a convenient tool for digging into the partly frozen earth at the water's edge. But such digging was becoming a useless expedient of a famished old beaver. The long tusk had so thickened against his lower lip, that to open his mouth at all was exceedingly painful. The constant irritation caused his lip to swell, pressing outward against the ungainly tooth. A day came when he no longer could open his mouth at all.

THEN Snag Tooth knew that he must take himself off from the others and die. For several days he lay within his dark corner, in his hutch, whimpering querulously. At last there gathered about him an ominous audience. Numerous flapping of tails sounded upon the branched floor. The forward members of the colony had come to pass sentence upon him, And as the council continued, Snag Tooth knew what it meant. He could expect no further tolerance from his fellows, not even from his mate. Petulantly he uncurled himself and crept toward the opening in the floor. The others crowded against each other to give him clearance. He slid into the water, dove, and came out alone under the iced roof. He feebly swam to the inlet tunnel, and there he dragged himself into the narrow, covered canal which emptied its tiny stream into the beaver pond.

They need not have thus driven him. It was an ignominy thrust upon him too soon. Only reluctance to leave his home which he and his mate had built, had caused him to delay. He was not so old, that his death should be hastened so sadly, and he had been the wisest of all his tribe. Tremendous strength had been the cause of his misfortune. He had been so skilled as a woodsman that he had led his fellows in all their undertakings. Even this covered canal through which he now was creeping painfully, had been started by himself.

Suddenly his sensitive eyes caught a faint gleam of daylight ahead of him. There should not have been daylight at this point in the tunnel, and Snag Tooth crept forward a little way, then paused, blinking against the strong glare. At that instant, a movement, a shadow, partly extinguished the light; then followed the sound of a heavy body splashing into the inlet stream. In another moment, the long slipping body of the otter filled the bottom of the narrow channel.

The otter had entered through an opening where the roof had caved. He came with snaky head protruding from the water and darting from side to side, as he sensed the presence of Snag Tooth. It was insult to him, that a straying beaver should block the runway which he had appropriated for his own use. He had no intention of retreating, or even of halting his expedition. Blinking in the darkness before him were the two pinkish, phosphorescent eyes of Snag Tooth. Those eyes continued to blink and to stare. What outrage was this, that a witless beaver should remain defiant of him? The otter made an impatient rush, expecting to frighten the insolent beaver back to the pond where he belonged.

But Snag Tooth, being on his death's journey, was past the point of concern over this alien interference. Perhaps he did not reason that one manner of death was as well as another; yet there remained to him but a single purpose. Already his death agreement had been made. To return would only mean the disgrace of being executed by his fellows. Perhaps he did not even reason this all out. There remained no reasoning to be done. He was crawling off to die. That was the only purpose left to

him. It was not to be thwarted. Snag Tooth held his position.

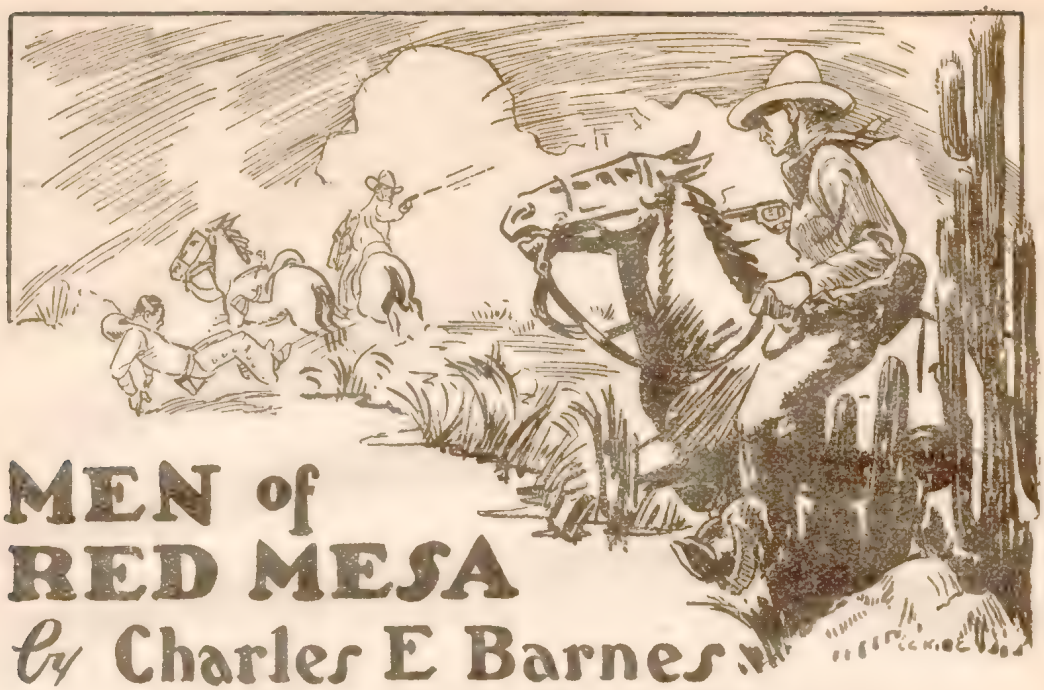
FOR just a fractional pause, the otter halted to reconnoiter. To try to pass Snag Tooth inoffensively would lay him vulnerable to attack. There was something malign, repugnant, and challenging about the old beaver with his feverish eyes and long gleaming tusk. His decision came with a powerful drive of his foreleg, with claws extended. Anticipating this attack, Snag Tooth's paws flew to his defenseless face. The terrible slash of the otter's claw ripped them away. But that had been only a tentative stroke by the otter. In sudden alarm at the otter's second, murderous attack, Snag Tooth's natural violence in defence unlocked his sealed jaws. Normally he never might have survived the snapping thrust which the otter aimed at his neck as he reared with his short arms impotently flaying at the darting head. But in a last struggle, he made a downward thrust of that long chisel snag which recent habit had taught him to use. Behind that drive there was all the power that remained in his weakened frame. Instantly there was the satisfying crunch of penetrated flesh and the jar of that sharp, ungainly tusk wedging into bone.

Forthwith Snag Tooth suffered a terrible yanking and wrenching of his body. He was being whipped about like an impotent rat. He would have released his hold, but he was powerless. He was dragged, and tossed and jerked, until the life was nearly threshed out of him. The otter, whose tremendous strength was letting itself with his life's blood. found himself trapped, pinioned by a dreadful implement of torture. He had been stabbed between the neck and the shoulders, and with one foreleg nearly useless, he was killing himself in an effort to be free.

Snag Tooth was dragged splashing through the mud of the canal. Though he had come thither to encounter that mystery which would end his sufferings, this was not the kind of an end which he had sought. He struggled to check his hapless progress. He was caught in some projecting roots. His body jammed sideways to the channel and he clung. A snapping jerk, and his upper jaw came loose from its hold.

Snag Tooth slumped limply back under the splash of water which poured over the little elevation of roots and sod. His tooth, as he thought, was paining him terribly. After a time he dragged himself to the edge of the channel and rested his sore head on his forepaws. His upper jaw was hurting him just like the lower one had hurt when once he had lost a tooth. Because of the pain, he began rubbing his lips. He tried to cleanse his mouth of the blood with which it was being filled. Something had happened. With peculiar ease, he worked his jaws.

It was a long time before Snag Tooth moved, and then it was because the limp body of the otter came slipping over the little waterfall and splashed down on top of him. He wriggled out of the way, and the dead otter went slowly slipping on. After a long time, he instinctively commenced gnawing the bark from the roots to which he clung. His jaw hurt him badly, but with increasing hunger, he found that he could eat with little inconvenience excepting the pain. As the nourishment reached his stomach, a sense of well being possessed him. As he continued to eat, his purpose to leave his home grew vague, until at last it seemed as though it had not even existed. He turned about and waded back along the canal. Reaching the pond, he swam with firmer strokes to the community log pile, where food was to be obtained more easily. Brown noses appeared about him, quivering with inquiry. Snag Tooth scorned them. And because he scorned their investigations, the others sensed that he had mysteriously changed. At length with his stomach bulging, he swam to his own hut, dove, and dragged himself up through the familiar opening. With contented *"tap-tapping"* of his tail, he hopped to his accustomed corner. Investigatively a soft, cold nose touched him, snuggled about him, sniffed the traces of blood. His mate sat beside him, delighted little tremors making her tail go *"r-r-r, r-r-r, r-r-r!"* over the little branches of the floor. Peacefully he sank into the sleep of contentment which justly follows upon a full stomach. The great overgrown tooth was gone forever. And that day the body of a very insolent otter was shoved through the outlet in the dam by a company of thrifty beavers.



MEN of RED MESA

by Charles E Barnes

Author of "The Passing of Death's Head Dorsey," etc.

Tim Lorry had learned his grim profession on the border, and at first glance the town of Red Mesa looked tame. But starting with a blind man who played poker with a gun at his side, the Thunder Valley country had a great plenty to offer in the way of swift peril and threatening intrigue.

Chapter I

TIM LORRY had been all of six hours in Red Mesa, and was inclined to grumble that he had found nothing in that one horse town to justify its evil reputation. Cool in the early morning shadow of the Furnace Range, a blazing inferno the rest of the day under the scorifying rays of the desert sun, the dingy collection of unpainted shacks did not look like promising entertainment, exciting or otherwise.

Lorry, communing with himself, declared he had seen more life in a border settlement where one saloon, a corral and a few unmarked six foot mounds occupied the whole landscape. Even Two Finger Joe's, about which establishment weird tales had drifted across the desert, had been a disappointment. He had visited the big barroom soon after his arrival, with the intention of giving it the once over, and had found even the bartender asleep with his head against the cash drawer.

It was better when he drifted in again after the lights were lit. He found the place comfortably filled, but after an appraising glance at the shifting crowd of ranchers, cowboys, miners, gamblers, with here and there a cold eyed, quiet spoken man who might be anything but had "dangerous" written all over him, he arrived at the pessimistic conclusion that it was the same old crowd. He could almost believe he had seen the same faces, heard the same medley of voices. Even the stray bits of conversation that reached his ears were the same things he had heard in other places, in front of other bars.

Lorry lounged through the crowd toward the bar with listless indifference, his reckless, goodnatured face looking decidedly bored. He found a place at one end of the bar close by a table where a game was in progress, and tired of waiting to be served by the perspiring bartender, he turned and cast a glance at the players. Instantly he was alive. Two Finger Joe's offered him at least one novelty—never before had he seen a blind man playing draw poker.

The afflicted one was occupying the side of a square table, a man with a mass of snow white hair and leathery face

criss-crossed by a thousand wrinkles; a face which, in spite of closed eyelids and a peculiar, unchanging stillness, conveyed the impression that it held the history of many a wild and desperate hazard. Lorry, noting the wide shoulders on a frame still lithe and wiry, and the firm lines of jaw and mouth, decided that the grim old man had been a fighter—was a fighter still—but, unmistakably the man was blind. The eyes under his shaggy, grizzled brows were closed most of the time, but when the lids opened it was plainly evident, from the fixed, undiscerning stare, that the orbs were sightless.

At the blind man's side sat a dark faced boy whose black eyes were singularly alert. Otherwise the expression of his face was one of patient endurance. His head, which was but little above the table top, was pushed forward by a hump rising where should have been flat shoulders. His left hand rested on the old man's thigh, and Lorry concluded that it was with his fingers he signaled to the blind man the value of his cards and anything else those black eyes saw that would be useful to the blind gambler.

Leaning against the bar, Lorry watched the game with an interest he made no effort to disguise. The assurance with which the blind man played an aggressive game, his cool nerve, and the utter lack of emotion in the grim old face, fascinated him. A small group had gathered near the table, but otherwise the game attracted no unusual attention.

Lorry turned to a tall, loose jointed cowboy standing next to him at the bar. "That's shore got me beat," he observed. "Who's the blind gambler?"

"That's old Silver—Silver Ransome. Ain't yuh never heard o' him?"

"Never been in this burg before," Lorry explained.

"Well, I s'pose it does 'pear kinda queer to a stranger. We're used to it round here. The old man's been stone blind goin' on five years, but he don't let it make no difference. He'll take yuh on fer anythin' from Californy draw to shootin'."

LORRY, with his eyes on the weather beaten face and its crown of white, could well believe that the old man would flinch at nothing; he was of the breed that never quits. His appraising glance passed to the other faces at the table. Four of them bore the typical brand of devil-may-care recklessness, but were neither noticeably good nor evil. The fifth player was of a different stamp. Better dressed than the others, his face clean shaven, he had a well groomed appearance, but there was something mean and vicious in his close set eyes and in the thin lipped mouth which opened and closed like a trap.

"Don't the old man git cheated?" Lorry asked.

"Cheated!" The cowboy paused to chuckle. "Not so's yuh'd notice. That humpbacked kid, Frenchy, has got eyes like a hawk, an' yuh kin bet yer neck nothin' don't git by him. He's a maverick Silver picked up som'ers in the north an' the old man's trained him till he knows every card trick that's ever been tried. The feller that tries to cheat Silver 'll be some hombre that don't know him."

"Old-timer is he?"

"Yeah, been here since the year one—got a big ranch in Thunder Valley. Yuh kin hear yarns 'bout him that'll make yer hair push yer hat off. It was before yer time an' mine, but 'cordin' to all accounts he was a holy terror 'fore his hair got bleached—an' he ain't nobody's game right now."

"It don't take no mind reader to see that," Lorry murmured, his gaze returning with a sort of fascination to the old man's face. Suddenly he became aware that something was happening at the card table. The mean faced man had just finished dealing. The other players were gathering up their cards, but those dealt to the blind man lay where they had fallen. Sitting back in his chair, his hands resting on the edge of the table, his sightless eyes turned to the dealer, Silver Ransome made no move to touch his cards. His face had not changed, and when he spoke his voice was singularly soft and quiet, but the group around the table sensed a rising storm and that corner of the room became curiously still.

"Yuh'll oblige me," the blind man was saying, "by takin' back them cards an' dealin' mine from the *top* o' the deck."

The man, who had put down the remainder of the deck and was about to take up his cards, looked up with a

startled glance and stared into the blind man's face with a puzzled look. For an instant suspicion shone in his close set eyes—a fear that the eyes into which he looked were not as sightless as they appeared. Apparently reassured, he shrugged his shoulders and demanded with a snarl, "What are yuh talkin' about? Are yuh insinuatin' that I slipped you a card from the bottom?"

"Not one—*two!*" the quiet voice corrected him.

"It's a damn lie!" the man shouted. "I'll leave it to any man at the table."

"Young man," said the blind man in a voice that was silky in its smoothness, "I sometimes allow a stranger to try to cheat me once, but no man ever lived to call me a liar twice. We'll stop the game long enough to settle this argument. I reckon yuh pack a gun?"

The man did pack a gun—his hand was already on the butt—but he hesitated about drawing. He appeared utterly at a loss, like one faced with an incredible situation. "Do yuh mean you're goin' to shoot it out?" he demanded in an incredulous tone.

"Yuh guessed it. Pierre, put my gun on the table."

The hunchback produced an ivory handled six-gun which he laid on the table in front of the old man. The other stared at it as if fascinated. He drew his own gun part way from the holster and dropped it back again. He had the air of a man who did not know what to do.

"I'll shoot it out with any man livin'," he said at length, "but I ain't never yet shot a blind man."

"Don't let that worry yuh none," came the quiet answer. "Joe's a most obligin' feller. He's got a dark storeroom back o' the bar with two doors. You go in one an' I'll go in the other. In there yuh won't have no edge on me. Mebbe if yo're lucky yuh'll come out."

LORRY was conscious of drawing a quick breath. He had seen many gun duels fought under a great variety of conditions, but this cold-blooded proposition made in that soft, passionless voice, took on the aspect of something sinister, yet he could not help a feeling of admiration for the old man who, despite his terrible handicap, seemed to dominate the room.

The offending dealer stared blankly at the sightless eyes while the color drained slowly from his face. He glanced around at the other players as if asking them to witness the absurdity of the old man's proposal, but he met only looks of cold curiosity. Evidently they saw nothing out of the way in the suggestion, and something in their bearing indicated they had little doubt of the result. Every man in the room was watching with curious eyes to see how this stranger would take it.

He looked again at the grim old face and the steady hands resting on the edge of the table. They looked like very capable hands, and the gun with its cracked and yellowed butt had a distinctly businesslike appearance. The picture of a dark room, with that uncanny old man listening for the sound that would locate his target, became too much for his nerves. Muttering an oath that sounded loud in the stillness of the room, he slid out of his chair, and shouldering his way through the crowd with a belligerent scowl on his unhandsome face, he disappeared through the swinging door.

The blind man had remained perfectly still, but he seemed to follow every one of the stranger's movements. As the door swung creaking to and fro, a sardonic smile twisted his grim lips.

"Beg pardon, boys," he said, "my mistake. I allowed I was talkin' to a man. Reckon it's yore deal, Mart."

The game was resumed without further remark. It was as if the stranger, having failed to qualify, had dropped beyond their horizon. Before the cards were dealt the vacant chair was taken by a man who immediately fastened Lorry's attention. He was of middle age, somewhere in the late forties, of massive frame, florid complexion and a general air of prosperity. His face indicated genial good nature. His wide mouth seemed to be forever struggling with a desire to laugh at the humor which he alone could see in the most trivial happening.

Evidently he was well known to the players, who greeted him with varying degrees of enthusiasm. He called the blind man "Silver" and the blind man addressed him as "Dan." It had all the appearance of a party of friends killing time with a social game. Lorry noticed, however, that with the advent of the big man, the game took on a new character.

The betting became much higher, the other players were frightened out more and more frequently by the high stakes, and the game gradually resolved itself into a duel between the blind man and the newcomer.

Fortune seemed determined to show no favors and shifted from one side of the table to the other without advantage to either. Silver Ransome remained the same impassive sphinx, and the man called Dan never lost his air of thorough enjoyment—if anything the humorous wrinkles at the corners of his eyes grew deeper when he found the blind man too much for him. But Lorry was conscious of a growing feeling that under the blind man's calm and the other's unbroken good humor there was a clash of wills which had little to do with the game.

The climax came with startling suddenness. Dan opened a jackpot for a hundred dollars. Silver alone stayed in and he raised it five hundred, which the other covered with a laugh. Silver drew one card. Dan stood pat and opened the betting with another hundred. Without hesitation the blind man raised five hundred.

The big man looked at his hand, then across the table at his opponent's impassive face while the smile on his own lips broadened. "I've got yuh beat this time, Silver," he said laughingly, "but it'll cost yuh a thousand to see what it is."

The answer came in a voice that was silkier than ever. "I'm wonderin', Dan, if yuh've got the nerve to back yer hunch. I'll see the thousand an' raise yuh the Circle Bar."

THE big man's face suddenly sobered. His eyelids closed to narrow slits through which his eyes gleamed with a curious light. "Just what do yuh mean by that?" he demanded.

"I mean I'll put my ranch on the table agin yores," was the calm answer.

One could feel the tension which brought a sudden stillness in the room, and Lorry again sensed a conflict of passions under the surface show of good fellowship. A bet of that magnitude to secure a pot holding not more than five thousand dollars was fantastic in its foolishness. That it had a deeper meaning than the winning of the pile on the table he felt assured. Watching the face of the man called Dan, he saw the lips draw in a hard line and two deep furrows appear between his brows while some of the ruddy color left his cheeks. During a full minute he sat perfectly still, his eyes searching the blind man's granite face. For an instant Lorry expected to hear him accept the monstrous bet, then his face suddenly broke into an amused smile and, dropping his cards, he said, "It's your meat, Silver, but I'd give a hundred dollars to know what yer bluffin' on."

"Chuck in the hundred, Dan," came the prompt reply.

One hundred dollars were counted and added to the pile on the table. The blind man laid his cards down face up, and with a swift movement spread them out, exposing four hearts and a club.

The beaten man laughed but there was little mirth in the sound. "Yuh've got the nerve o' the devil, Silver," he said, "but one o' these days I'm gonna call yer bluff."

The game was finished. There was a general movement to the bar, and as Lorry slowly drank his nightcap he listened eagerly to the comments of his neighbors on the blind man's gigantic bluff.

"Yuh wouldn't believe it to look at 'em," said one, "that them two hates each other like a hoss hates a rattler—been gunnin' fer each other more years than I've knowed 'em, an' it's a durn funny thing—old Silver seems to git the best of it every time."

"Yeah," came the answer in a drawling voice. "It looks thataway, but Dan Wetherly ain't no easy man to beat. He's allus got somethin' up his sleeve, an' 'tain't allus jest as pleasant as that tarnal grin o' his'd make yuh think."

Before crawling between his blankets that night Lorry unfolded a long typewritten document, and by the light of a flickering candle, glanced rapidly over the closely written pages. Coming to the last paragraph he read it slowly:

It's no use my telling you to handle the job in your own way—you'll do that anyhow, you young idiot—and I don't see you advertising yourself with a brass band; but there is one man in that Godforsaken country to whom you can make yourself known with safety. Dan Wetherly, owner of the Dumbbell Ranch, can

put you wise to everything going on in that country. I don't know him, but I got this tip from Senator Martin and you can take it for what it's worth. I am enclosing the numbers of all the bills that were taken in the last holdup. None of these have yet come out of that county. Take your time. It's up to you to get to the bottom of these robberies and to get the big actor, but be careful, boy, that they don't get you.

Chapter II

LORRY hooked one leg around the saddle horn and let his horse walk while his eyes scanned an apparently endless floor of sage dotted plain. The road he was following hugged one side of the valley, winding along the cliffs and foothills of the Gold Range. Ten miles away the Snake Mountains rose like a parallel wall to shut in the semi-desert of Thunder Valley. Lorry reckoned he had traveled twenty miles since leaving the ranch-house where he had spent the night, and according to the information he had gathered there, Wetherly's ranch still was twenty miles ahead

Alhough consciously headed for the Dumbbell ranch he was not riding with any definite plan, certainly not with the intention of making himself known. He felt the necessity of learning something about this land of mountains and desert valleys, getting in touch with its people; and he knew no better way than to find work on one of the big ranches. Naturally his thoughts turned to the one man who had been recommended to him as safe.

He had started early, riding fast in the cool of the morning, but now the sun beat down with a merciless heat which made fast travel nothing short of lunacy. Letting his horse choose his own gait, he scanned each break in the mountain wall at his side, anxiously looking for signs of water of which both he and his horse were feeling urgent need. As far ahead as he could see there was nothing but barren rock and sunburned slopes and he was beginning to speak of the country in unfriendly terms when, turning a jutting point of rock he arrived at the mouth of a gulch in the bottom of which the dry gravel bed of a watercourse indicated a flood-time stream of water. It was possible that farther up he might find a remnant of that stream before it filtered away into the parched ground. This hope was strengthened by the existence of a well marked trail leading into the gorge, and the fact that his horse turned into it with quickened steps and without guidance.

He followed the trail on the side hill around several bends, and had arrived at a point where it dipped suddenly to a grove of willows which, he felt certain, must cover the spring he sought, when he heard the clatter of iron shoes on the rock behind him. Quickly he turned his horse to face down the trail, then sat motionless, his eyes fixed on the point where it turned the last bend. He waited but a few seconds, then a horseman appeared riding fast around the bend who, on catching sight of Lorry, reined in and approached him at a walk.

He was a man of huge size with extraordinarily wide shoulders above which was a face, grimly morose, at present disfigured by a heavy scowl. He pulled up a few feet from Lorry and scanned him with a searching look which took in everything from the wide sombrero to the horse's feet.

"Who are yuh, an' what are yuh doin' here?" he demanded gruffly when he had finished his inspection.

Lorry's eyes were twinkling with amusement and there was the suspicion of a grin on his lips as he looked the other up and down. "I don't reckon it's any o' yore business," he finally said, "but I'm myself, an' I'm doin' what durn' well pleases me— Don't do it," he added as he caught the beginning of a movement of the man's hand. "If yuh should accidentally touch that gun yuh'll be only one wink from the graveyard."

Lorry's hand was resting but a few inches from the gun swinging at his hip. Though he was still smiling there was a threat in his steel blue eyes and something ominous in his perfect ease.

The man returned his hand to the saddle horn, but his scowl deepened. "You're a stranger," he growled, "an' yer talkin' big, but yer like to find this ain't no barnyard to crow in. Strangers ain't wanted in this valley!"

THE smile on Lorry's lips widened, but before he could reply a change came over the grim face in front of him, the heavy scowl giving place to an appearance of embarrassment. At the same instant Lorry caught the sound

of a horse climbing the trail behind him. He turned his head and promptly forgot the existence of the unfriendly horseman. He was looking straight into a pair of brown eyes in whose soft depths he was momentarily lost.

It was a young girl, slender and straight as a willow whip, who came riding up the slope on a gray mare whose small head and slender legs showed blood in every line. In the brief moment before she reached the top of the rise he had time to photograph on his mind a frank, winsome face—in which he had a suspicion a dimple would appear the moment she smiled—and a crown of golden bronze hair, but it was the fearless look of her steady eyes that held him captive.

Lorry had never been accused of diffidence, but for once his ready wit failed him and he sat dumbly gaping at this unexpected apparition. Made suddenly aware, by a slight flush on the girl's face, that he was staring rudely, he swept off his hat and stammered, "Excuse me fer hoggin' the trail. I was lookin' fer water."

The girl had reined in her horse at the top of the rise, and now answered him with a smile which brought to light the dimple Lorry had foreseen. "There is water down here," she said, and Lorry at once decided her voice matched her wonderful smile, "but you may not be able to find it. I'll show you."

She turned her horse on the narrow trail with the skill of an accomplished horsewoman and Lorry followed her down the slope. His subconscious mind was aware that the man behind him had not moved, but this fact did not interest him in the slightest degree. For the moment he was entirely taken up with the slender, graceful figure on the horse ahead.

She led the way under the willows where the dry black muck was stamped with a thousand hoofprints, a tantalizing sign of water that had been, but offering little promise now. Threading her way through winding tunnels, around hummocks crowded with willow brush, bending low to escape the interlacing branches overhead, she arrived at the rock wall forming the other side of the canyon which rose abruptly out of the dry swamp. At the base of the rock a thick growth of brush, its bright green foliage in vivid contrast with the parched surroundings, gave sure indication of moisture.

When Lorry drew up at her side the girl pointed down at the bush and said, "You'll find a hole under that bush and a tin cup. You'll have to reach down two feet to get the water, but it's good. We call it Jacob's Well."

Lorry dismounted with a word of thanks and, parting the bushes, soon found the hole and the cup. Still on his knees, he took one satisfying gulp of the clear, cold water, looking the while over the rim of the cup up into the girl's face, then he forgot he was thirsty. "I reckon," he said suddenly, taking the cup from his lips, "brown is jest the most beautiful color in all the world."

The girl looked her surprise, but she answered quickly. "You're wrong. I think the rose glow on Snake Mountains at sunset is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen."

"Yes, but rose colored—er, I mean, if some things was rose colored they wouldn't cut much figger."

"Perhaps not. I'm sure I shouldn't care to ride a rose colored horse. I thought you said you were thirsty."

"I shore was once, but that was a long time ago. Pears like I recollect somethin' 'bout a thirsty hombre meetin' a girl at Jacob's Well. Yore name don't happen to be Rebecca, does it?"

"Nothing like that," the girl laughed, "I'm sure yours is not Jacob."

"It ain't, but from this minute it's gonna be."

"You'll have to camp at this well a long time before you find a Rebecca," she retorted.

"Mebbe so, but Jacob was shore a good waiter an' I'm his twin brother."

SOMETHING she read in his eyes brought the flush again to the girl's face and she impulsively swung her horse's head around. Lorry, fearing she was about to leave him, hastily swallowed the rest of his water, filled his hat from the spring and held it for his horse to drink, then leaped into the saddle and followed her out through the willow thicket. On reaching the trail he saw the horseman, who had not moved from where they left him, and apparently was watching for their appearance. As they started up the rise he turned and rode slowly down the gorge.

"Do yuh happen to know that feller?" Lorry asked.

"Yes," she replied without turning her head. "That's Mike Fallon, dad's foreman."

"Is yer father's ranch far from here?"

"You're on it now."

"Oh," said Lorry slowly, "that accounts fer his inquirin' turn o' mind."

"Was he rude to you?"

"Oh, no, jest a little too cocksure he was gonna git an answer."

"Any stranger is a suspicious character here," the girl explained. "There is always more or less rustling going on in these mountains, and the boys think every strange man is a lawful target, though rustlers don't bother dad much. He's got them pretty well scared."

"I'm lookin' fer a job," said Lorry yielding to a sudden impulse. "Do yuh think yer father wants any riders?"

"Possibly. Lafe Parsons fouled his rope at the roundup last week and he won't ride again this summer. You'd better come along and talk to dad."

They were still on the narrow trail, just riding out on the fanlike mouth of the gorge, and though Lorry would have given much to know if she was as indifferent as her voice indicated, he could read no answer in the slender back and golden bronze head from which he had never taken his eyes. As the girl rode out on the flat the gray mare broke into a lope. Lorry spurred to her side, but apparently she had no wish to continue the conversation. His various attempts to interest her drew little more than monosyllables in reply.

After riding about two miles she turned from the main road where a side valley stretched away into the heart of the Gold Range, and the buildings and corrals of an extensive ranch came suddenly into view. Alongside the stables was a corral of unusual size with a high fence of heavy poles. Near this a number of men were standing, also the surly horseman who, while riding ahead of them, had kept them constantly in sight.

"There's dad by the corral, if you want to talk to him," said the girl. "He has no use for bashful men; I think you might please him." She gave him a quizzical glance which brought a sudden flush to his face, and touching heel to her mare, swept off in the direction of the big ranch house. Lorry's gaze followed her until she turned the corner of the house, then he rode slowly toward the stables. His mind had been too fully occupied to note any detail of the group by the corral, but now his glance was immediately arrested by a hunchback boy and traveled at once to the man at his side. There was no mistaking the wide shoulders, seamed face and silvery hair. It was the blind gambler.

The recognition gave Lorry a pleasant feeling of anticipation. The blind man he had seen at the poker table had many times occupied his thoughts and was the subject of many speculations. In coming to Thunder Valley he had hoped to find an opportunity of seeing more of the man who had taken such a hold on his imagination. To find that he was also the father of the most winsome girl he ever had seen gave an added zest to this second encounter. It was with a slightly quickened heartbeat that Lorry rode up and dismounted before the blind man. "Mr. Ransome," he said without preamble, "I'm hopin' yo're wantin' to hire a rider."

THE blind man was already facing him, and for an instant Lorry had a vivid impression that those deep set eyes of fighting blue were seeing right through him. Instead of answering, Silver Ransome laid his hand on the hunchback's shoulder. The boy's piercing eyes had been steadily fixed on Lorry's face and he spoke without interrupting his penetrating scrutiny.

"Twentee seex. Seex feet. Hundred eightee pound. Laugh when he fight, an' he queet nevaire."

Lorry grinned at this rapid summing up of his appearance and character, but had an uneasy feeling of something uncanny in the calm assurance with which the boy delivered his judgment. His thoughts were interrupted by the blind man's soft voice.

"Kin yuh ride?" he asked.

"I ain't done nothin' else since I was big enough to straddle a horse," Lorry answered with a laugh.

"At this minute," said the blind man, "the boss of the Circle Bar is that roan devil in the corral. Git in there an' ride him. If yuh stay on, yuh kin put yore blankets in the bunkhouse."

Lorry had been aware of a disturbance in the corral, had caught a glimpse of men and horseflesh through a haze

of dust. Looking now, he saw that the prime mover in the fracas was a roan horse which two men were vainly trying to hold in one place. A Roman nose, nostrils flashing red and eyes showing a round circle of white warned him of an incorrigible outlaw, but there was no hesitation in the way he dropped his reins to the ground and strolled over to the corral gate.

He had been conscious while talking to the blind man that the faces around him were by no means friendly. There had been both suspicion and resentment in the openly hostile glances of the brown faced, be-chapped cowboys, but these changed to grins and looks of solemn anticipation as he started to carry out the old man's orders.

Lorry slipped through the gate, and approaching the group in the center of the corral, paused to look the horse over. When for a brief moment the animal stood still, he spoke to him in a soothing tone and tried to stroke the arched neck still sweating from the last bout, but the roan would have none of it. He swerved away at every approach of the stranger hand, and it was only after many patient trials Lorry got his foot in the stirrup and with a lightning move swung to the saddle. At the same instant the two cowboys released the horse's head and made a dash for the corral rails.

Lorry barely had touched the saddle when it rose under him like the upheaval following an explosion. During the next few minutes he was riding the top of a cyclone. It dropped him to earth with a shock that threatened to send his spine up through the back of his head, then tossed him aloft to catch him on a saddle made of iron. The world had shrunk to a dizzy, swirling dust cloud through which he caught confused glimpses of the row of silent men on the top log of the corral fence.

He had a wide acquaintance with bad horses, and thought he was prepared for any trick the mind of horse had conceived for unseating an unwelcome rider. He found that the roan not only knew them all but had invented some of his own, movements that never belonged to a four footed animal, and it seemed he would never tire.

When the horse found he could not get rid of the thing on his back by any of the means that had never yet failed him, he seemed determined to crush his rider against the corral fence. Several times Lorry turned him as his leg brushed the logs. After a terrific rocking leap, a back wrenching upheaval with a twisting side kick, in which the roan put all the strength of his steel muscles, he stood still. But it was only for an instant, then he upreared. The head in front of Lorry came up, up with a swift, steady heave that showed no sign of stopping. There was one sickening instant of doubt while the roan pawed the air, then he toppled over backward in a pinwheel. At the critical moment Lorry's feet slipped from the stirrups and he landed on his feet as the horse crashed down at his side.

When the roan struggled to his feet Lorry was again in the saddle. A few feeble jumps and the horse, shaken by his fall and utterly discouraged by the failure of his supreme effort, stood still. Lorry leaned over and talked to him for a moment, then walked him over to the gate and dismounted. Flinging the rope to an astonished cowboy, he opened the gate and went out.

HE WAS shaken by the terrific battle, his very bones felt sore, and he was angrily aware that he was trembling all over, but he pulled himself together with a jerk when he got outside the gate. The girl was standing by her father's side and he caught a look in her brown eyes that sent the blood to his head. Into the blind man's face had come a flush of color. The hunchback looked at him with a steady scrutiny that seemed to read his very thoughts. Behind this group loomed the huge form of Mike Fallon and in his face was no sign of friendliness or congratulation. His scowl was a distinct warning that from him Lorry need expect no overtures.

Silver Ransome seemed aware of the exact moment when the young man stopped before him. "That's ridin'," he declared as if he had seen the whole performance. "What's yore name?"

"Tims," Lorry answered. "Mostly I'm called just Tim."

"Give me yore hand."

Lorry extended his hand, blessing his stars that it was now reasonably steady. The blind man grasped it firmly and held it several seconds during which Lorry had an uncanny feeling that some

intimate knowledge of himself was passing to the sightless brain.

Releasing him, the old man said curtly, "Yuh'll do. Yuh kin bunk in, Mike'll show yuh where."

"Look-a-here, Silver," the big foreman gruffly protested, regardless of Lorry's presence, "I've told yuh a'ready I don't hold with hirin' strangers."

"When a stranger comes along who kin teach the Circle Bar how to ride, there's only one outfit where he belongs. Mebbe if yuh watch him he kin teach yuh somethin' else."

Silver's voice was as quiet and smooth as ever, but Lorry wondered if it was imagination that made him think there was a slight emphasis on the words "watch him." He could not be sure, and was inclined to laugh at his suspicion, but for many days the words and the very tones of the blind man's silky voice persisted in haunting him.

Chapter III

IT HAD been so easy to attach himself to the Circle Bar outfit Lorry was inclined to pat himself on the back. He started in on his new job with lively anticipation of improving his acquaintance with Sybil Ransome, but before many days had passed he had reason to believe he had made a bad bargain. Never had a new hand been given a harder gruelling. Mike Fallon allowed him barely time to eat and sleep. He seemed determined to drive the unwelcome intruder to a point where the later would chuck the job.

Lorry was not slow to appreciate the situation, but under his happy-go-lucky manner was an obstinacy which made him equally determined to stick, though after a fortnight of exhausting labor he began to doubt his wisdom in stopping at the Circle Bar. He saw the time slipping by and he had as yet made no start on his real business. But this was only a passing thought. He was engaged in a test of endurance with the big foreman and he had no intention of coming off second best.

With the other riders his unfailing good humor had gained for him a certain standing; but he had a feeling that they merely endured him, that between him and them was a fence he could neither cut through nor get over. Of one thing he became convinced—that there existed in the outfit, from Mike Fallon to Sow Billy the chore boy, an almost fanatical loyalty to Silver Ransome; and Lorry had a growing conviction that he was regarded as an enemy to the blind cattle man.

Although driven almost beyond endurance, Lorry had not failed to remark a number of curious things for which he could find no adequate explanation. Although since that first day he had been unable to get within speaking distance of Sybil Ransome, he knew that she rode every day, but always to the south, never north toward Wetherly's; and one, sometimes two of the cowboys invariably followed her at a distance, but near enough to keep her in sight.

He learned that the surface good fellowship veiling the enmity between Wetherly and Silver Ransome did not extend to the men of the two outfits. There was open hostility of the most active kind apparent whenever they met on the range, but this did not account for the evident solicitude for the girl's safety. Lorry could not conceive the possibility of danger to a woman from any bunch of cowmen, however rough and lawless. A few questions in the bunkhouse convinced him that he would learn nothing there. The men made it plain that Wetherly and his outfit were not subjects for discussion.

One morning a passing Indian brought word that a steer bearing the Circle Bar brand was lying in Dry Creek Canyon with a broken leg. Fallon ordered Lorry to ride with him to investigate. Dry Creek Canyon penetrated the Gold Range some miles north of Wetherly's ranch. Their easiest route was up the valley through the Dumbbell range, but Fallon chose to take the mountain trail.

They had ridden in silence the best part of an hour when Lorry, moved by an impulse to bring things to a showdown, suddenly demanded, "Fallon, who in thunder do yuh figger I am?"

The big foreman, taken by surprise, turned on Lorry a lowering look of dislike. "I don't care a damn who yuh are," he replied with surly ill humor, "but when I find out fer sure what yuh are, yuh'll be mighty clost to that graveyard yuh mentioned."

Lorry returned the foreman's stare with a slight lift of his eyebrows. "Yuh've got wheels in yore dome, Fallon," he said. "I'm tellin' yuh right

now that I'm tired o' bein' looked at like a stray cur that's strayed into a kennel o' thoroughbreds. Yo're tryin' to run me off this ranch. Yuh can't do it. I'll stay here till I'm ready to go. If I might make a guess, yo're figgerin' I'm up to somethin' that'll hurt Silver Ransome."

"If yuh take my advice, young feller," Fallon growled, ignoring Lorry's last remark, "yuh'll travel while the trail's open. If yuh don't," he added with a vicious light in his deep set eyes, "yo're like to stay here fer good."

"Is that all yo're gonna tell me?" demanded Lorry.

"That's enough," was the gruff answer. "I don't warn a man more'n once."

THEY were riding on a wide bench which on one side ended abruptly in a sheer cliff dropping to the level valley floor. In the distance, Wetherly's alfalfa fields made a vivid green patch on the dun colored plain. On the bench they passed numerous bunches of grazing cattle which Fallon, who had the eyes of an eagle, scrutinized closely as they rode by. Something about a white blanketed, red cow grazing apart with her calf attracted more than his usual attention. He rode nearer, followed by Lorry who saw at once that while the cow carried the Circle Bar the calf was marked with Wetherly's dumbbell.

Fallon made no comment but his face was like a thunder cloud as he turned to Lorry. "Drive that cow back an' put her in the Red Gulch corral," he ordered. "We'll pick her up when we come back. I'll wait fer yuh."

The Red Gulch corral was a half mile behind them. Lorry drove the cow and calf back along the trail, put them in the corral and returned at a lope. When he rode up on the bench he was surprised to see four horsemen where he had left Fallon alone. Any encounter so close to Wetherly's was sure to mean friction, and the attitude of the men was enough to tell Lorry that they were very near to something worse than high words. Pushing his horse to a run he drew rapidly near to where Fallon faced three adversaries, in one of whom Lorry recognized Buck Ewing, the lantern jawed foreman of the Dumbbell. He arrived in time to hear Ewing's sneering taunt, "I said yo're a liar. The only thieves in this valley is marked with the Circle Bar. Now what yuh gonna do about it?"

The tense attitude of each of the four men was more than significant. It needed only the slightest movement by Fallon to start a merry war. Fearful that Fallon's temper would not stand the baiting, Lorry boldly drove his horse between the two men. "Pears like this argument's gone fer enough," he said, smiling into Ewing's angry face.

"Yuh keep out o' this, young feller," Ewing snarled. "'Tain't nothin' to do with you."

"Guess again," said Lorry smoothly, "I'm an hombre that's got a whole heap to say about it—I'm ridin' fer the Circle Bar."

"We know all about that," Ewing retorted. "You keep out an' yuh won't git hurt, but if yuh butt in here yuh gotta look out fer yerself."

For answer Lorry backed his horse until he was alongside his foreman. "Git busy," he said quietly. "We're waitin' fer yuh."

For a moment the two men stared at each other while the whole group sat rigid. It was the stillness of a calm just before hell breaks loose. Lorry's lips wore a smile but it was the smile of a man who shoots to kill, and through narrowed lids his eyes had the glint of blue steel.

Over Ewing's face came a look of baffled rage. "Yuh know damn' well yo're safe or yuh wouldn't be so cocky," he snarled. "As fer you, Fallon, ride with yer hand on yer gun when yuh come on the Dumbbell range." Without waiting for a reply he swung around and galloped off, followed by his two men.

Lorry stared after the retreating horsemen in blank amazement. What did the man mean? Was it possible the Wetherly outfit knew who he was and hesitated to attack a Federal officer? He glanced quickly at Fallon and was not unprepared for the foreman's accusing stare. Lorry swore under his breath. He had welcomed the encounter as giving him a chance to range himself openly and squarely with the Circle Bar, but had only succeeded in complicating his position; and the worst of it was, he could give no explanation without making public his errand in the valley, which he was not prepared to do.

AFTER supper that night Mike Fallon went at once into the big ranch-house. It was more than two hours before he came out. Though it might have been any of a hundred things connected with the business of the ranch that kept him in conference with the owner, Lorry had no doubt that the incident of the morning was responsible for his visit, and was being described and invested with all the iniquitous meaning Fallon's suspicious mind could imagine. It probably meant that he would be told to move on, but Lorry's obstinacy was well to the front and he was determined he would not go unless driven out by the owner himself.

The next morning he sat holding Fallon's horse in front of the ranch-house, waiting for the foreman who was again closeted with the blind man, when Sybil Ransome came out on the porch. Lorry expected nothing more than the distant nod with which she had greeted him the few times their ways had crossed, but to his great surprise she ran quickly down the steps and came to his side with the evident intention of speaking to him. Leaping from his horse, he was about to speak when she interrupted him, speaking hurriedly and looking into his face with troubled eyes. "Mr. Tims," she said, "won't you go away—out of this valley?"

"Why, Miss Ransome?" he asked, taken aback. "Yuh shore ain't made yore eyes tired lookin' at me."

"It is not that at all," she protested in the same hurried manner as though anxious to finish what she had to say before being interrupted. "You are not safe here and—I want you to go."

"Not safe?" he repeated smiling.

"Please don't laugh," she begged, her lips quivering. "I can't tell you more, but please go!" At that instant the sound of Fallon's voice reached them from the hall, and the girl turned abruptly and moved off in the direction of the stables.

All that morning, while Lorry roped and tied in a smothering cloud of alkali dust, he alternately cursed at the false position into which he had put himself and exulted at the thought that Sybil Ransome was concerned for his safety. After the mid-day dinner he was ordered to drive the bunch of cows and newly branded calves across to the eastern range. It was one of the rare times when he was allowed to work alone.

As he rode behind the slowly prodding herd he set himself seriously to consider the difficulties of his situation. His sense of duty told him to cut loose from the mysterious Circle Bar outfit, and get busy on the work he had come to do. Every other part of his nature cried out in protest. He was still far from arriving at a decision when he left the cattle on the foothills of the Snake Range and started back.

Riding out of a draw to the floor of the valley, he noticed a group of four horsemen coming from the south. They were riding hard at a pace which would carry them across his course well ahead; but when nearly abreast of him, one of the riders separated from the others and came directly toward him. As he drew near Lorry recognized the jovial face of Dan Wetherly.

He had not met the rancher since watching him at the poker table with Silver Ransome, and he studied him now with a lively interest. This was the man recommended to him as safe and as one who could be of assistance to him, but he was also the enemy of Sybil Ransome's father. Under the circumstances did he want to be under obligations to Wetherly? The rancher's first words went far toward settling the question for him.

"Hello, Lorry!" was Wetherly's hearty greeting as he swung in at Lorry's side with extended hand. "Been lookin' to see yuh every time I been out on the range. Looks like they keep yuh mighty close over there. Don't want to lose sight o' yuh, eh?"

"Why do yuh call me Lorry? My name is Tims."

"Oh, that's all right," Wetherly answered with a chuckle. "I'll remember. I had word yuh was comin' an' mos' likely yuh'd look me up. But I reckon yuh don't need any tellin' how to go to work. Yuh sure had a hunch when yuh settled down at the Circle Bar."

"I don't get yuh," said Lorry looking puzzled.

Wetherly squinted with amusement bringing out a network of wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. "Cautious," he remarked. "Well, I s'pose yuh have to be. I heard about that row up on the bench yesterday," he said, changing the subject abruptly. "It's mighty aggravatin' to have all yer men at war

with another outfit an' that outfit a next door neighbor. I try to keep 'em peaceable but 'tain't easy, an' I can't say as I blame 'em much. Old Silver's educated his boys to believe this whole country belongs to him—the rest of us is only here on sufferance. Every man that rides fer the Circle Bar is balancin' a chip on his shoulder, an' mine ain't nowise backward when lead's a-flyin'. But yuh needn't let it worry yuh—they got orders to let yuh alone. If it happens yuh git in a tight corner jest call on any o' the Dumbbell outfit an' they'll back yuh till hell freezes."

While Wetherly talked Lorry was doing some rapid thinking. Undoubtedly the man was fully informed of his purpose in coming to Thunder Valley, though he was at a loss to imagine where he could have obtained the information. He apparently had suspicions which were connected in some way with the Circle Bar Ranch. This was a new angle and a most unwelcome one. Lorry was more than anxious to learn all that Wetherly could tell him, but he was not yet ready to exchange confidences.

"Happen I want to quit the Circle Bar, could yuh put me on at the Dumbbell?" he asked.

"I sure kin," Wetherly responded heartily, "but don't yuh think of it. Jest set tight where yuh are an' keep yer eyes open. If yuh see anythin' yuh don't understand, let me know an' mebbe I kin help yuh."

"Fer example?"

"I ain't gonna say anythin' to give yuh a prejudice," said Wetherly slowly, "I ain't gunnin' fer Silver, but I'm bound to say there's things goin' on at the Circle Bar that'll take some explainin'."

"Can't yuh tell me what they are?"

"No. Mebbe I'm chasin' rainbows. I don't visit at Silver's an' like as not I don't hear things straight. Jest keep yer eye on Silver an' that French boy an' mebbe yuh'll learn somethin' an' mebbe yuh won't. An' don't fergit—if yuh want any help I'm standin' with yuh."

Wetherly gathered up his reins and with a smile that made his face a picture of genial good will, he called a cheery "So long," and galloped after his cowboys who were now far up the valley.

Crossing the wide sage covered plain, Lorry rode slowly, much disturbed by his conversation with the jovial rancher. His half formed purpose of shifting his quarters to more congenial surroundings where he could pursue his investigations unhampered by constant suspicion, had received a check. Vague as Wetherly's hints had been he could not afford to ignore them. At the same time he felt a strong distaste for the rôle of spy which he must now take up in earnest, of which heretofore he had been only suspected.

It was not a happy young man who rode slowly past the ranch-house on his way to the corral, and his feelings were not improved by the sight of an arm chair drawn close to the rail of the porch, a black sombrero on the floor which he recognized as belonging to the hunchback, Pierre, and lying on the rail in front of the chair, a long telescope.

Chapter IV

THAT morning the gray mare was fresh and Sybil Ransome let her run. The rapid motion helped to dull her sense of failure. She had violated her sense of loyalty to her father in warning the man he considered his enemy and had an unpleasant conviction that the effort was wasted. The young man's smile, and an indefinable hardness that came into his eyes when she spoke of danger had told her he was not of the kind that ran away, and something in her of her father's nature applauded. She dug heels into the mare and sent her flying at a still faster pace, as she realized that she was recalling with a strange feeling of pleasure the look she had seen in the laughing eyes of the strange young rider when she first met him at Jacob's Well.

She felt her face growing warm and shook herself impatiently as she bent forward in the saddle and urged her horse to run. But later, when the mare dropped to a lope and then to a walk, she appeared not to notice the change. Staring straight ahead with unseeing eyes she tried to work out her problem. Last night she had listened with quiet face while Mike Fallon endeavored to convince her father that Tims was that most despicable thing, Dan Wetherly's spy. She could not believe it, but she feared her father did.

She shivered as though she felt a sudden chill wind, recalling Fallon's cold blooded plan for goading Tims to a show of fight which would give excuse

for killing him, and his anger when her father refused to permit it. But it was only a temporary respite. Her father's protection of the young rider was only for the purpose of giving him rope until they could discover what he was driving at. She had to admit there was an air of mystery about the young man. The attitude of Wetherly's men as described by Fallon was hard to understand, but she refused to believe it was evidence enough to convict him. There must be some other explanation. If only she could have a talk with Tims and get him to clear away all these suspicions! But that she could not do.

She roused herself from her reverie, realizing that unconsciously she had guided the mare into the trail leading to Jacob's Well. She was not thirsty, and had no reason for following this blind trail, but she went on until she reached the spring at the base of the cliff as she had done more than once during the past few weeks. For the first time she admitted to herself that the attraction of the place was intimately connected with a vision of a young man on his knees, laughing eyes looking up at her over the edge of a cup. Although she felt no need, she dismounted and dipped from the well a cupful of water which she began to sip slowly. There was the sound of a horse moving through the willow brush and a moment later Shorty Haines, who this morning had been told off to follow her, rode up to the spring.

Sybil threw away the water she did not want and reached the cup to Shorty as he dismounted.

"Yuh shore had the mare goin' some this mornin'," he grumbled as he knelt by the spring. "Yuh ain't trainin' fer a race or nothin' be yuh?"

"Stirred up your old cowpuncher hobbyhorse, did I, Shorty?" Sybil asked with a laugh. "I seem to remember hearing you brag you had the fastest string of horses in the valley."

"Yuh know durn' well," he retorted, pausing with the cup half way to his lips, "I kin run away from anythin' in Thunder Valley 'ceptin' that doggone fleabitten mare."

Shorty buried his face in the cup and missed the girl's scrutinizing look and the light of resolve that came into her brown eyes. "I'm not so sure about that," she said with a tantalizing air. "That bay that Tims rides looks as if he could make you pound some."

"I ain't never run with him," Shorty replied gruffly, with a sudden constraint in his tone.

"Tims don't seem to be popular with the men—what's the reason, Shorty?"

"Plenty o' reason. Not that he ain't a good feller most ways—an' he shore kin ride. I kinda like him myself, can't somehow see him doin' crooked work, but Fallon's durn' set he's read his brand, an' it ain't one that fits in at the Circle Bar."

"Do you think Fallon's right?" Sybil asked.

"Durned if I know," Shorty replied, his goodhumored face clouded by a frown. "Sometimes I think Mike's got bats in his dome, but there's some things that's got to have a lot of explainin', an' till then I gotta say Mike's right."

"Do the other men think as you do?"

"Most of 'em think with Mike. The rest is on the fence like me."

"I wish he'd go away!" Sybil exclaimed with a gesture of impatience, "I'm sick of all this mystery and talk of killing. It's like living on top of a powder magazine. It's been so ever since I came home from school."

"He won't go," Shorty returned positively, "not onless Silver tells him to hit the trail. He might be all they say he is—I ain't denyin' it—but he ain't the kind that quits. He'll stay till somebody calls his hand an' I got a hunch the showdown'll be some scrimmage."

"Can't something be done to stop it? Can't you do something, Shorty?"

"Now look-a-here, Miss Sybil," said Shorty earnestly, "don't yuh be gittin' hold o' the rope at the wrong end. Mebbe I ain't so shore as some that Tims is a crook, but if it turns out he's tryin' to do dirt to Silver, my gun won't be the last one out. I'd like to see him come clear, but I ain't doin' nothin' but what Silver says."

Shorty's round, boyish face, usually beaming with mischievous humor, had become set and hard. Sybil was quick to see the uselessness of further appeal to the loyal cowboy, and turned away with a feeling of helplessness.

THAT afternoon, restless and filled with foreboding which she could not dispel, Sybil wandered about the house and finally out on the

porch where she found Pierre busy with a long telescope, apparently watching with absorbing interest something on the other side of the valley. As she climbed to a seat on the rail he laid the glass down and turned to her, his eyes softening with a look of doglike devotion which changed to anxiety as he noted the troubled look in her dark eyes.

"I tink sometings mak for trouble, *n'est-ce-pas?* he said. "Is eet dat Pierre can do somet'ing?"

Sybil looked into the black eyes of the hunchback boy with a warm sense of the strong affection she knew he felt for her. She knew also his uncanny skill in reading character. Acting on sudden impulse she asked, "Pierre, what do you think of Tims?"

The boy did not answer. He looked away across the sunlit plain to where the Snake Range rose like a dark blue wall against the sapphire sky, and was silent so long Sybil began to wonder, when suddenly he took up the telescope and handed it to her. "Look where de white rock she fall from de mountain," he said abruptly.

Sybil directed the glass across the valley and soon located the huge sentinel rock where it lay on the flat at the foot of the cliff, but she knew at once it was not the rock he wished her to see. Within the field of vision were two horsemen riding slowly toward her. In one she instantly recognized the man who had been in her thoughts all day, but the other, whose features were partially hidden under his wide brimmed hat, she could not make out.

"Who is the man with Tims?" she asked.

"Is eet dat you do not know de pinto horse?"

"Dan Wetherly!" She had no difficulty now in recognizing the portly owner of the Dumbbell ranch. For a moment her heart seemed to cease beating. She had the sinking feeling of having lost something of inestimable value. The round patch of sunlit valley blurred. She was no longer seeing anything out on the plain, but she kept the glass at her eye until she felt she had control of her features, then laid it down and turned to Pierre. "Let's go to dad," she said. "We must stop this."

They found Silver Ransome in his den, sitting as he often sat for hours in his big armchair, facing the window as though he looked out over his broad acres and could see the grazing cattle, the coming and going of the busy riders, the growing grain and alfalfa, all the things that had made up his life.

As they entered the room he turned his face toward them, his grim mouth softening in a smile of welcome. "Come an' talk to me, Sybil," he said without the slightest hesitation, "I reckon I was near to gittin' lonely."

"I'm sorry, dad." She drew a low stool to his side and sat down, putting her arms across his knees. "I would have come in an hour ago, but I thought Pierre was with you."

"Ah, yes, Pierre. What did yuh see, Pierre?"

Sybil glanced quickly up into her father's face. His right hand was stroking her hair, the other lay motionless on the arm of his chair; his face expressed only a mild interest in the answer to his question.

"Wetherly an' t'ree men come up de valley. De men go on. Wetherly he stop an' talk wit' Tims four, five minute. Dey shak' de han'."

"Very good, Pierre. Now my dear, what shall we talk about?"

There was only one thing in her mind about which Sybil desired to talk. She was tortured by a longing to understand the mystery that had made her world so suddenly dead and dreary. Something of her misery was in her voice when she responded. "Dad, won't you tell me what all this means? Why are you afraid of Dan Wetherly? Why does he want to spy on you? I know he is your enemy, but why? What have you ever done to him that he should hate you so?"

THE blind man's lips drew in a smile and a chuckle shook his wide shoulders. "I reckon yo're the only one ever thought I was afraid o' Dan Wetherly." He paused while the chuckle rumbled again in his throat. "As fer why he wants to spy on me, that's another story, an' I reckon it's time you knowed about it. 'Tain't no secret. The old-timers all knew it, an' I guess most o' the new ones have heard about it. It began a long time ago, long before you was born, when Dan's father, Mark Wetherly, was runnin' the Dumbbell. The Dumbbell Ranch in them days was right here, an' it run the biggest

herd in the country. The Circle Bar didn't amount to much, but it was growin' fast, an' it was where Dan Wetherly is now. Mark Wetherly was a hard man—he'd take the shirt off his own brother if he got the chance—but he was a born gambler, an' so was I. We was allus buckin' each other, but mostly I had the luck an' generally quit the winner. It got to be that Mark would sooner beat me at draw than brand a thousand calves." He paused and seemed to be recalling the details of a picture seen long ago.

"It was right here in this room we played our last game," he went on. "That night it 'peared like Mark couldn't do nothin' right. I had all the luck an' won a pile o' money from him—mostly in I O U's—but he kept pushin' up the limit till it got to the sky. Bimeby he begun to bet cattle an' I was winnin' so fast I was feared he'd break himself. I wanted to quit but he wouldn't have it. He wanted to bet his ranch agin mine an' all I had won that night on a single hand o' showdown. I was reckless in them days an' ready to stake anythin' down to my shirt, an' took him on. Mark dealt the cards an' I won. I didn't want him to be broke so I gave him the ranch that had been the Circle Bar, the one Dan's got now, but he hated me like poison till he died, an' he died cursin' me.

"Dan was a youngster then, an' he set here an' watched his father throw away his ranch. He's allus said he didn't blame me, he allowed it was a straight gamble an' I had the luck; but all the same, I know that when Mark was dyin' Dan took an oath to git more'n even with me. Dan's the kind o' coyote that allus works in the dark. He's tried to git me a good many ways—a hundred times in the last thirty years I'd 'a' shot any other man—but he didn't hurt me much.

"But I'm gittin' old an' I'm gittin' tired of it. Yo're growin' up an' I ain't gonna have him passin' anythin' on to you. When yuh shied at allus havin' one o' the boys trailin' at yore heels I didn't tell yuh why, 'cause I didn't want to scare yuh, but Dan's jest low down enough to try to hit me through you. The other day I gave him a chance on a dead sure thing to git his ranch back—I owed him that much—but he didn't have the nerve to take it, an' now we're square. I don't owe him anythin' an' when he hits again I'm gonna hit back hard."

There was silence when the old man stopped, broken only by the rustling of the breeze in the climbing vine outside the window, the distant lowing of cattle and the gurgle of water in the irrigation ditch running past the house. Sybil, staring out through the window, could see from her low seat only a patch of blue sky, but she was looking at a young man on his knees and laughing eyes looking at her over the rim of a cup.

"Dad, do you believe that Tims is working for Wetherly?"

"It looks mighty like it, but I'm not shore. When I am, he won't be workin' much longer."

Sybil shivered. Every way she turned the way seemed to be blocked. If only the man would go away! He was probably all they suspected and she wanted never to see him again, but she could not bear the thought of what would come sooner or later if he remained on the ranch.

"Won't you send him away, dad?" she begged. "Then he can't do you any harm."

"An' then I won't know what the game is," the blind man retorted. "No. I'll keep him here till I kin call his hand."

Sybil knew it was almost as easy to move the Snake Mountains as her father when he had made up his mind, but she persisted. "Please, dad," she begged. "All this talk of killing frightens me. Please send him away."

Something in the girl's voice caught the blind man's attention. He groped for her hand and covered it with his own. After a moment of silence, he asked, "Do yuh like this young man, Sybil?"

"I hardly know him, dad," she replied, "but somehow he does not look like a man who could do a mean thing."

"An' if I prove to yuh that he's settin' a trap for yore old dad, what then?"

"He would be the meanest creature that crawls, but I'd still ask you to send him away. For your own sake, dad, don't have any trouble!"

For a full minute the old man sat motionless, his face giving no indication of his thoughts, then he suddenly asked, "What do you say, Pierre?"

The boy's black eyes shifted from the

blind man's face to the girl's and he seemed to read many things in her beseeching eyes. Torn between loyalty and devotion, he was silent for a tense moment, then answered curtly, "Send heem away."

"Well, we'll see," said Silver Ransome, and Sybil knew there was nothing more to be said.

Chapter V

THE weekly mail stage, going north through Thunder Valley, passed the Circle Bar with clock-like regularity each Wednesday at noon. Being their one connection with the outside world, to the inhabitants of the hundred and fifty miles of semi-desert it was an institution, as much a part of their lives as the daily rising, riding, eating and sleeping.

Anything that interfered with its prompt arrival with the little bags of mail meaning so much to the isolated homesteads, was a matter of concern to every man, woman and child in the valley. In former days holding up the stage had been a lucrative occupation for a number of enterprising outlaws who found safe refuge in the mountains fastnesses of the district, but these robberies invariably had occurred on the south bound trip when the iron box under the driver's seat held more or less gold. A newly elected sheriff, who was deadly with a gun and had no use whatever for handcuffs had cleared the mountains of the outlaw gangs, and for a time the stage had covered its three hundred mile route without being disturbed. Then a new series of robberies startled the county and created a disturbance which reached to the Capitol at Washington.

The latest appropriators of other people's property ignored the gold carried south from the mines and devoted their attention to the registered mail carried on the northbound trip. The big ranchers were accustomed to conducting their business transactions with ready cash, and it was seldom that the stage came north without a consignment of money to some of these or to the bank in the town of Caxton on the other side of the Gold Range. For a time the mountains were combed by county and Federal officers, but with only the negative result of proving the non-existence of any new outlaw gang in the neighborhood. There followed the natural inference that the new series of robberies was conducted by residents of the county. Suspicion became rife. Neighbors looked askance at each other and the most innocent actions took on a sinister meaning.

A careful record was taken of all banknotes sent through Thunder Valley with the hope of tracing them to the guilty parties, but none of these had appeared in circulation. It was at this point that Marshal Tom Mathews, stirred to activity by a curt and unmistakable hint from Washington, sent Tim Lorry to the seat of trouble with instructions to settle down in the valley and stay there until he located the thieves.

Lorry had not undertaken the job with any marked enthusiasm. Had he been asked to pit himself singlehanded against a gang of border outlaws he would have carried out his orders with gay recklessness and swift, clean cut efficiency; but this was a task for which he had little liking. Spying on bluff old ranchers and daredevil cowboys did not appeal to him. It went against the grain.

After his interview with Wetherly—a meeting which he was certain had been observed from the ranch-house—he was more than ever dissatisfied with his position. Wetherly's hints had left him with a decided feeling of annoyance. That Silver Ransome had anything to do with the mail robberies was too absurd to consider for a moment, yet he could not entirely ignore Wetherly's suspicions. But, after all, what were they? If there was any foundation for the bits of gossip he had picked up during his stay in the valley, there was bitter enmity between the two ranchers, enmity that kept guns loose in their holsters, and made every stranger an object of suspicion. Was it not probable that Wetherly's vision was biased by his hatred? He must see the rancher again and make him talk out.

In the meantime he had to consider seriously his own position at the Circle Bar. Surrounded by suspicion, his every movement watched, he would have little opportunity for learning anything there. There was every reason why he should pull out, but he must induce Wetherly to talk first. Then he would decide.

HE UNSADDLED and with a slap sent his horse trotting into the corral. As he turned away from the gate he saw the boy, Pierre, coming toward him with the evident intention of speaking. Lorry, from the first time he saw him, had felt a liking for the little hunchback, though he had never exchanged a dozen words with him. Pierre was rarely to be seen separated from the blind man, never appearing alone except when Silver Ransome was resting in the house. He had little to do with the other men, who seemed to regard him with a certain awe. Lorry, therefore, watched his approach with considerable curiosity.

The boy's black eyes seemed to have read the thoughts that were disturbing him. "De trail eet look veree steep, *n'est-ce-pas?* he said.

"Say it again, Pierre. What does it mean?" asked Lorry smiling to hide his surprise.

Pierre seated himself on a block of wood and picking up a chip began to break it in pieces with slender fingers which, nevertheless, looked very strong. "De trail ahead it lead nowhere—mebbe over de precipice. De wise man he not go too far."

Obviously the boy wished to give him warning of some danger, but Lorry could see nothing friendly in the old young face. On the contrary it had an oddly threatening look.

"Yuh've got somethin' crowdin' yore thinkin' machine. Spill it out, Pierre," he said.

A sudden fierce light came into the boy's eyes and he spoke with an energy there was no mistaking. "I tell you something for me. You come from de Wetherly for mak de trouble for Silver. You mak one leetle move for hurt de blind man an' you go out like dat!" He snapped the heavy chip in his fingers with a sound like a pistol shot. "I tell you anoder somet'ing," he went on, his voice growing softer, "not for me, not for Silver, for de leetle woman dat mak herself de trouble. You go away an' you not come back, den mebbe de trouble she finish an' de leetle woman she laugh some more."

Lorry, become suddenly sober, shifted his gaze out to where the shadow of the Gold Range was creeping across the sunburned plain. He was silent so long, Pierre, who was watching him keenly, stood up and was about to move away.

Seeing the movement, Lorry turned, his lips twisting in a whimsical smile. "You win, Pierre," he said. "Yuh kin tell the little woman I'm hittin' the trail so's she kin laugh ag'in, but tell her this, too—I got nothin' to do with Wetherly, an' I never had a thought o' doin' harm to her old dad." Without waiting to see how the hunchback took his denial he turned and strode off toward the bunkhouse.

Lorry planned to see Silver Ransome in the morning and tell him he was leaving, also, he intended to tell him some other things, but he did neither. After the early bunkhouse breakfast Fallon curtly ordered him to take a letter which he said was important, to the Triangle C thirty miles down the valley. His first impulse was to refuse, but a natural repugnance to announcing his retreat, to anyone but Silver Ransome made him reconsider, and he took the letter thinking a day more or less would make little difference.

Going to the harness room to get his saddle he noticed, as he took it down from its peg, that the latigo was worn almost through at the ring. He laid the letter down while he repaired the damage, and had ridden past the corral and the rear of the ranch-house to reach the cut off trail, before he discovered he had left it there. He could not have told why he did such an unusual thing as to dismount and walk back to the stables, but his brain, that morning, was not working normally.

He was picking up the letter when, through the chinks of the log wall, he heard the sound of voices and his name spoken in Silver Ransome's unmistakable voice followed by the gruff tones of Mike Fallon.

"He's out of the way," Fallon said, "I sent him down to the Triangle C."

"Who are yuh takin' with yuh this time?" was the next thing he heard in Ransome's soft voice.

'Shorty an' Long Pete."

"Yuh couldn't do better. They're reliable an' they're both quick with a gun. But no killin', remember. Wing 'em if yuh have to shoot. Where are yuh aimin' to hide out?"

"Top o' Cougar Pass."

"Most likely place. Better git away by eleven an' take the upper trail. The stage won't git there till about four.

If yuh have any luck better not show up here till after dark."

"They fooled me last time," Fallon growled, "but it won't happen agin." The voices died away as the men moved off and Lorry, stunned and utterly miserable, stood fingering and twisting the letter until it was a sorry looking mess. Gradually the effect of the shock passed. He glanced at the mutilated paper with a grim smile. It was probably of no importance, merely an excuse to get him out of the way.

Remembering the message he had sent to Sybil Ransome, he was overwhelmed with a sudden disgust for the duty that faced him. That message was now a lie. But Lorry was not a man to waste much time in self pity. Waiting until he could get away without being seen, he stole out of the stable and to the place where he had left his horse. Twenty minutes later he was riding fast on the upper trail heading north.

COUGAR PASS he knew fairly well, having ridden over it a number of times, and he agreed with the blind man that the top of the divide was an ideal place for any one having designs on the stage. Thick brush bordered both sides of the road at the top of a long, steep hill. The stage would probably stop there to breathe the horses, or if not, it would be moving very slowly. Lorry had plenty of time on arriving at the pass to study every foot of the ground. The road took a short bend at the top of the hill, and he decided that the ambush would be in the thick bush on this bend from which the holdup men would have a clear view of the last hundred yards of the grade. Satisfied that he knew just how the affair would be managed, he cached his horse well back in the timber and climbed to a position on the hillside where a jungle of boulders gave him good cover, and from which he could watch the bend of the road.

The wait was a long one. More than once Lorry wished he had not been in such a hurry. Inaction gave him too much time to think and his thoughts were not pleasant. Resolutely he tried to put everything out of his mind but the fact that he had the stage robbers in the hollow of his hand. He shrewdly suspected the three men would not be taken without putting up a fight, and the prospect of action began to stir his blood. He examined his guns, slipped them in and out of their holsters several times, and when at last he caught the sound of horses moving cautiously through the brush, he smiled.

He could not see the riders until they came out on the road below him. They rode at once to the top of the hill and appeared to be studying the ground much as he had done, but to his surprise, instead of taking cover in the place he had selected for them, they rode into the timber on the other side of the road and passed out of sight. A few minutes later he saw Shorty Haines climbing the opposite cliff. When the cowboy reached a ledge directly across from Lorry's position he lay down flat on the rock, his face turned steadily toward the road where it wound up the hill.

There followed another long wait before Lorry heard the tramp of horses and rattle of wheels as the stage started up the last steep rise. Glancing across the gorge he saw that Shorty was making signals to the others in the timber below him, but he was making no move to leave his position. Leaving his hiding place, Lorry began to move cautiously down the hillside, creeping from boulder to boulder. There was one short space of bare rock slide, which he must cross to reach the shelter of the timber, where Shorty could not fail to see him if he glanced that way, but Lorry reckoned that the cowboy would be fully occupied in watching the approach of the stage. He reached the slide and started swiftly across.

He was almost over when a stone, loosening under his feet, started a small slide. The sudden noise was startling. He threw a quick glance across the gorge and saw Shorty looking straight at him. The little man's hand was on his gun and it was already half way out of the holster. Lorry did not wait to see more. Two leaps that would have done credit to a mountain goat carried him under the trees through which he ran to the edge of the road.

Crouching low in the bushes, gun in hand and every sense on the alert, Lorry waited for the next move. A moment later the stage pulled over the top of the hill, stopped a full half minute while the driver rolled and lighted a cigarette, then went on. There was no sign of

movement on the other side of the road, and though he listened intently, there was no interruption of the steady *clip-clop* of the trotting horses as the stage swung down the western slope. His trap had failed. Lorry was not much given to profanity, but it was no Sunday school language he addressed to the rolling stone that had prevented him catching the supposed mail robbers in the act.

There was nothing to be gained, and possibly much useless danger in remaining in that neighborhood where he could be surrounded before he was aware of it. Making a wide detour, Lorry worked back to his horse, then made another circuit until he reached the road far down the mountain. On reaching the valley floor he took a diagonal course across the wide plain, and when he passed Wetherly's, and later the Circle Bar, he was close under the Snake Range, riding fast and riding south.

Chapter VI

IT WAS said of Jim Orton, owner of the Triangle C, that the only thing he loved better than whisky was a chance to gossip. When Lorry rode in just before dark, the rancher was alone and distinctly bored with the prospect of a dull evening and early bed. An unexpected guest was a God-send and roused him to more than usual hospitality.

"I'm sure glad to see yuh, but yuh don't mean to say Fallon made yuh ride clear down here an' back jest to bring this," he said as he glanced over the mutilated letter Lorry delivered.

"Not quite so bad as that," Lorry replied, "I'm ridin' on to Red Mesa."

"Well, that's different. Yuh'll be stoppin' the night o' course. Jest set right down till I find yuh some chuck. Pity yuh didn't come along last night, yuh'd 'a' had company. Dan Wetherly went by this mornin'."

"Ridin?"

"Yeh, ridin' his pinto. But mebbe yuh don't care much 'bout ridin' with him. Queer how him an' Silver Ransome hates each other, but I s'pose tain't nothin' but what yuh'd expect o' Dan. Silver's allus got the best o' him jest like he got the best o' his old man. I s'pose yuh've heard tell how Silver won the old man's ranch?"

"I've heard somethin' about it. Won it at cards, didn't he?"

"Yeah, on one hand o' draw. Dan can't fergit that, an' they say he swore to his old man that he'd skin Silver to his shirt fore he died, but he don't 'pear to be progressin' none. Silver's too much fer him. Yuh didn't hear nothin' o' the stage bein' stuck up 'fore yuh come away, did yuh?"

"No," said Lorry, "did you?"

"No. I was only jest wonderin'. I've got kinda superstitious about these here holdups. Every time Wetherly's down south on stage day seems like it's a sign to the robbers to git busy—mos' 'pears like somebody's afraid o' Dan an' waits till he's out o' the way."

"Onless it was somebody on the Dumbbell outfit, they wouldn't know when Wetherly wa'n't home." Lorry suggested.

"Well, there's Silver an' me, an' Big Mac at the Lazy M, nobody ever goes by that we don't see 'em. It might be one of us is the robber, an' then again, mebbe somebody jest keeps watch on Wetherly's from the mountain. Yuh can't tell who it might be. When I hear some o' the boys talkin' what they're gonna do when they ketches the thief I'm kinda reconciled to bein' rheumatic an' not up to ridin' far. I've heard 'em guess at purty near everybody in the valley, but nobody ain't never figgered on me bein' spry enough, not far's I know. Whoever it might be, I'm hopin' they'll ketch him purty soon. It uster be we was all friends, all 'ceptin' Silver an' Dan, but now it's got so's nobody won't talk to yuh. Everybody ridin' with their guns loose an' ready to draw if yuh look cockeyed at 'em."

The old man was still talking an hour later when Lorry, making an excuse of an early start, went off to bed. He was away shortly after daybreak and rode into Red Mesa just as the sun was setting. He took a room at McCaffry's Palace Hotel, and later in the evening leaned against the bar in Two Finger Joe's idly looking on at the night life of that popular resort.

Wetherly was at the poker table where Lorry had first seen him, but his companions were quite different. They were a hard faced quartette, odd looking company for the jovial rancher, and one of them was causing Lorry considerable annoyance. He felt he should be able

to place the man and call his name, yet it was most unlikely he had ever seen him. One side of the man's jaw was sunken as if at some time it had been crushed, giving to his face a repellent, lopsided appearance. It was a face once seen not easily forgotten, yet Lorry was obsessed with the idea that he knew the man.

He was studying the misshapen face, trying to account for the impression when, looking up, the man's eyes caught his. A moment later he leaned over and said something in a low tone to Wetherly. The rancher turned and glanced carelessly about the room until his eyes rested on Lorry. He nodded with his usual jovial smile, and when the hand was finished, left the table and drew Lorry aside to a vacant corner of the room.

"Any news?" he asked when there was no danger of being overheard.

"No," Lorry replied. "Nothin' 'special."

"Seein' yuh down here I reckoned yuh must o' got onto somethin'."

"Just lookin' round to see if I kin pick up anythin' at this end o' the line," said Lorry.

"Um-um, mebbe 'tain't a bad idea, but if I'd 'a' knowed yuh was comin' down I wouldn't 'a' come jest now."

"Why not?"

"I don't jest like the idea o' you an' me bein' away from the valley at the same time."

"I don't get yuh," said Lorry, a little nettled at Wetherly's assumption that he was an important factor in the search.

"Well, it's this way," said Wetherly, lowering his tone until it was almost a confidential whisper. "Fer a long time I been keepin' a purty close watch on everythin' that goes on up the valley, an' I guess somebody knows it, 'cause most every time I come away somethin' happens. I reckoned this time it'd be all right seein' you was there at the Circle Bar an' yuh wouldn't let anythin' git by yuh."

"I've quit the Circle Bar."

Wetherly turned on him a quick look of surprise. That he was annoyed was plainly evident. "Yo're makin' a mistake, young man," he said emphatically. "There ain't no place yuh'll learn more'n right there at Ransome's!"

"I reckoned I'd do better playin' a lone hand," was Lorry's noncommittal answer.

"Got anythin' up yer sleeve?"

"Nothin' to brag about. Looks like I'd better give my hoss a rest an' take to stagin' the rest o' the summer. The best place to look fer a chicken thief is in the hen house."

"Huh!" grunted Wetherly. "Mebbe yuh think so, but I'm tellin' yuh yo're wrong."

WETHERLY did not return to the table, but went out through the swinging door. Lorry's gaze followed the broad back as it weaved through the crowd, and his eyes narrowed in speculation.

As the door swung to, his mouth twitched at some amusing thought, then with an impatient shrug he sauntered back to the bar. The poker table was still occupied but the man with the sunken jaw had disappeared. Lorry saw him again the next morning in one of the "loafer chairs" at the Palace. He was reading a piece of old newspaper but Lorry suspected the paper was only a blind to cover a lively interest in his movements. Lorry stopped at the desk to light a cigar and, turning suddenly, caught the man looking at him around the edge of his paper, which at the moment hid the sunken side of his jaw.

Instant recognition flashed through Lorry's brain. He *had* seen the man before—the center of an angry crowd who were fighting a sheriff's posse for the privilege of lynching him. His offence then had been maiming cattle in the course of a rancher's feud. The sunken jaw was no doubt the mark of some later exploit.

Barney the Bat was not the man who could engineer a series of successful mail robberies, but it was safe to bet he was mixed up in any crooked work going on in his vicinity. And it was evident he was on terms of a sort with Wetherly—something to think about. Before night Lorry had learned that The Bat was known in Red Mesa as Barney Kroslo, that he had no known occupation but was well supplied with money, his own account being that he had sold a mining claim and was spending the proceeds.

A visit to the stage office brought him another surprise. He found the express agent, a sandy haired man with a de-

cided stoop, engaged in earnest, low toned conversation with a man of whom Lorry could see nothing but a broad back and the top of a wide brimmed hat pushed back on his head. As Lorry entered, the agent made a warning signal and the conversation ended abruptly. The other man turned and, with a careless glance at Lorry, sauntered out of the office. It was Barney the Bat, and in the sandy haired agent Lorry recognized another of the group he had seen at the poker table with Wetherly. He had hoped to get some useful information from the agent without disclosing his identity, but the man's evident friendliness with The Bat warned him to be cautious. He made a casual inquiry about the southbound stage and went out more than ever convinced that he would be wise to keep an eye on the man with the sunken jaw.

It was in following this plan that he found himself late that night in his old position, leaning against the bar in Two Finger Joe's where he could overlook the poker table. The game was stud poker but there was an apparent listlessness about the players which argued an unusual lack of interest. When Lorry first took up his position, Barney the Bat was sitting with his back against the wall, but later, when one the players left the game, he shifted to the vacant seat, which move brought him directly facing the bar.

The game proceeded with the same curious lack of interest and Lorry, wearied of watching it, was about to move away when the player whose back was toward him, a fat man whose face he had not seen, suddenly brushed his cards into a heap and, leaning over the table, snarled at The Bat, "Yuh can't put that over on me, yuh lopsided tinhorn! Yuh slipped a card an' reckoned I didn't see yuh. I ain't playin' with no sleight-o'-hand perfessors."

"Yer a damn' liar!" shouted The Bat.

The fat man reached for his gun and at the same time threw his body to one side. What followed happened so quickly it was hard to follow. There were two explosions separated by the merest fraction of a second. The fat man's bullet went over The Bat's head and was buried in the ceiling. The Bat's passing where the fat man's body had been, struck Lorry. Lorry felt a blow on his side as if he had been hit with a hammer and he dropped to the floor in a heap.

There was an immediate commotion, a scurry to get out of range, and when no more shots were fired, a rush to the side of the fallen man. As an innocent bystander he commanded a sympathy which would have been entirely lacking had he been a principal in the affair.

Before anyone touched him, Lorry opened one eye and drawled, "Is the shootin' over?"

"Yeh, if yuh call that shootin'," one of the bearded faces replied. "There's some fellers packin' guns round here that orter be herdin' sheep. Did it git yuh bad?"

Examination revealed that Lorry had had a narrow escape. The bullet had struck in line with his heart but to one side, and glancing on a rib, had passed around his body under the skin and out at the back. He would be sore for many days but he was not seriously hurt.

"Where's the gun wrangler that handed me that bouquet?" he demanded, getting on his feet.

BUT The Bat and the fat man both had vanished. Someone volunteered the information that both had slipped out of the room immediately after the shooting. Lorry listened grimly to the freely expressed opinion that men who scattered lead with promiscuous uncertainty were good for nothing but targets and should be given some practical lessons in straight shooting, but he had little doubt as to the meaning of the fracas.

With the eye of a gunman he had seen every detail of the exchange of shots. The fat man was just a little too deliberate in his aim over The Bat's head, and when The Bat pulled the trigger his eyes were not on the dodging fat man, but on him. It might have passed for an accident had they been men unaccustomed to handling a six-gun, but it was altogether too crude for The Bat.

Lorry had plenty of time during the next few days to ponder on the meaning of the attack, which he was convinced, was deliberate. Even though The Bat knew him—which was very probable—there was no reason arising out of past events for wishing to put him out of the way. The only conclusion he could arrive at was that his presence in Red Mesa threatened to in-

terfere with some of the Bat's activities, and from what he knew of that hombre this was more than likely.

The morning after the shooting he was somewhat surprised when Wetherly breezed into his room. "What's this I hear 'bout yuh tryin' to swaller another man's pill?" the rancher asked, his hearty voice filling the room. "Ain't yuh got enough to do takin' yer own medicine?"

"I guess that pill was comin' to me all right," said Lorry. "It was plumb careless o' me to reckon every man that packs a gun knows how to use it. I shouldn't 'a' got in the way."

"I seen Kroslo this mornin'," Wetherly announced in his breezy way, "an' he's lookin' 'bout as happy as a man who's bit a 'choke pear. What 'tween poor shootin' that's disgraced him in Red Mesa, an' hittin' a stranger that he ain't got no reason to draw on, he's jest nachelly sore. He wanted me to tell yuh he kin shoot better'n that."

"Yeah, mebbe he kin, but tell him if I'm in front of him the next time he fools with a gun, I'm gonna shoot first, an' I allus hit what I shoot at."

"I'll tell him to look out fer yuh," Wetherly laughed. "I reckon this'll lay yuh up fer a while. I'd like to've had yuh up to the Dumbbell while yo're pickin' up, but I've jest sold out."

"That so? Are yuh givin' up the cattle business?"

"That depends. I got my eye on a place over Clearwater way that I might buy."

"Movin' out right away?"

"Mebbe in a week or two. I sold to a Phoenix outfit an' I gotta stay till they're ready to take over. We'll be all upset at the ranch, what with packin' up an' one thing an' another, but I won't likely be goin' away 'fore yer on yer feet agin, an' I'll keep an eye on things in the valley. You jest take it easy an' don't worry none 'bout the holdups. I'll put some o' my boys on to watch the road till yo're in fightin' trim. Well, so long!"

Wetherly carried his genial smile out of the room and Lorry lay for a long time gazing at the door through which he had disappeared. The rancher's visit had evidently cheered him, and if one could judge by the expression of his face, had furnished him with considerable amusement.

Chapter VII

HIGH up in Eagle Pass, where the post road climbed over the Furnace Range before dropping down into Red Mesa, Lorry rode slowly, still conscious of the barely healed wound in his side. At each high point of the road he stopped and keenly scrutinized the gorge behind him. At the top of the divide he left his horse, and climbing to a high ledge, watched for a full half hour the patches of road he could see in the direction of Red Mesa.

He had made his exit from the desert town under cover of darkness and had felt confident he had not been observed, but several times during the morning he had seen a horseman on the road behind who, in spite of his frequent stops, seemed determined not to pass him. He had now covered several miles since his last glimpse of the distant rider.

The man seemed to have disappeared and yet there was no place in that narrow gorge where he could have turned aside. Ahead, there were still ten miles of wild country, narrow, tortuous canyon and wider spaces covered with heavy timber, before he would reach the open floor of Thunder Valley; a very unpleasant road to travel with an enemy on his trail. Lorry held a firm belief that the first principle of safety was to protect one's back. On his present errand he could not afford to have anything behind him about which there was any uncertainty and he determined to settle his doubts if it took all the rest of the day.

After crossing the divide, the road for some distance was cut in a fairly straight line through a heavy growth of timber. Lorry rode nearly to the end of this stretch, then turned into the bush. Tying his horse he returned to the road and settled himself to wait with what patience he could for the appearance of the elusive traveler.

The day was oppressively still. Not a breath of air stirred the tops of the pines, and underneath their high arches only the faint hum of insects broke the sleepy silence. Lorry might well have believed he was alone in all that mountain wilderness. Seated on a protruding root, peering out between the bole of a tree and a sentinel boulder, he had a clear view of the road from the south.

He had watched this for what seemed

an endless time when a sound, slight enough but startling in the dead silence, made him turn his head. He was just in time to see a horseman emerge from the timber onto the road a short distance north of his position. At the same instant there came an explosion from behind and he felt a tug at his belt as the bullet sped by and hit the boulder. Quick as a flash he threw himself flat on the ground and put the tree between him and the marksman, but not before another shot sounded, this one from the road.

Lorry realized that his new position exposed him on that side and made a quick dodge for the boulder. Peering around the side of the rock, his gun ready, he was in time to see the horseman shoot again. But Lorry was not his target, for he was firing into the wood.

There was a sound of someone running through the bush; Lorry caught a fleeting glimpse of a figure darting from tree to tree and took a quick shot at it without apparent effect, then the silence fell again. Putting away his gun he walked out to where the horseman was still standing. "'Lo Shorty," he drawled.

SHORTY HAINES met his smiling look with a scowl that gave his goodnatured face the appearance of a thunder cloud. "If I'd 'a' knowed it was you that feller was gunnin' fer, I wouldn't a wasted a couple o' good cartridges," he growled.

"I'm shore obliged just the same," Lorry replied with a grin. "Yuh didn't happen to see what the feller was like, did yuh?"

"I didn't see nothin' 'ceptin' he had a sorta lopsided face." Shorty touched heels to his horse and would have ridden by—plainly he had no wish to continue the conversation—but Lorry stopped him.

"Hold on a minute, Shorty," he said, "You an' me's gotta have a palaver, an' it ain't gonna hurt yuh none to hear me spill a few words o' wisdom. Last time I seen yuh, yuh was huggin' a rock up in Cougar Pass an' I reckoned yuh was all set fer holdin' up the stage."

"Yuh reckoned what!" exclaimed Shorty, his eyes opening wide with astonishment. "Yuh broken winded fourflusher, we was up there to ketch you or some o' the rest o' yer outfit."

"Perzactly!" said Lorry. "Yuh had it all fixed I was the heavy villain an' I was dead shore I was gonna nab you with the goods. Happened we both played the hand wrong. Are yuh still thinkin' I wear the Dumbbell brand?"

"I ain't got no reason to think nothin' else."

"Did yuh ever squint yore eye on anythin' like this?" Lorry opened his shirt, and turning it back, exposed a silver badge pinned on the under side.

When Shorty saw it his mouth fell open. Over his scowling face came a ludicrous change. "Do yuh mean to tell me yer a marshal?" he demanded.

"That's purty near the size of it," Lorry replied. "Jest a deputy, though. Now will yuh git down off that hoss an' have the palaver I was suggestin'?"

Shorty swung to the ground. "Tims, why in thunder didn't yuh tell us up at the ranch?" he demanded as they seated themselves on a log at the roadside. "Yuh'd sure saved a lot o' trouble."

"I reckoned I had a good reason, but I don't mind ownin' up I was dead wrong. My name ain't Tims—leastwise that ain't all of it—I'm Tim Lorry."

"Are you the feller they call Two Gun Lorry down on the border?"

"I'm that hombre."

"Well, I'm damned!" Shorty's stare was that of a man trying to adjust himself to an entirely new conception.

"Is Wetherly still hangin' out at the Dumbbell?" Lorry asked.

"Yeah, 'less he come away after I left. He's sold out."

"I know. When's he movin' out?"

"Dunno, but Steve Hanley told us he dropped a passenger there on the up trip an' he was one o' the buyers come up to pay over the money. I reckon it's straight, 'cause Steve could find out the business of a deaf an' dumb man if he had him fer a passenger. Shouldn't be surprised if Wetherly'd be comin' down the road any day. That's the reason I'm down here."

"What's it got to do with you?"

"Well, it's this way," Shorty explained after some hesitation. "Silver's had it in his head for a long time that Wetherly knowed a lot about these mail robberies, an' we been layin' fer him—that's the reason we took to watchin' the road. 'Sides that the old man suspicions that Wetherly is workin' up some kind o' trap fer him. He's durn' sure

the skunk won't clear out 'thout havin' a whack at him an' he wants to git to the bottom o' this holdup business so's to have a rope on the critter. 'Cordin' to Silver, all the money that's been stole is cached away som'ers; an' he reckons Wetherly's got a big bunch of it an' mebbe the hull of it. He's been gittin' in a lot o' cash, more'n he wants to pay his men, an' he ain't been buyin' cattle. Silver figgers he caches the money that's stole an' pays off the fellers that does the business with regular money. Somehow he found out Wetherly's got a bank account in New York, an' now that he's pullin' out, it's more'n likely he'll send the whole bunch on there—if he ain't done it a'ready."

"Shorty, jest take a warnin' by me an' see what comes o' bein' born a pigheaded fool. It's took me six weeks, an' then I had to git a bullet in the ribs to figger that out—an' Silver could o' told me in six minutes. Some men's got brains an' some ain't, an' half o' them that's got 'em don't know how to use 'em. What was yuh aimin' to do about it?"

"S'posin' he come down the road with the bunch o' money I was gonna hold him up an' git the numbers off the bills."

"Yo're like to git yoreself in trouble, young feller."

"Don't I know it? But I'd do more'n that fer Silver. All the same I'm mighty glad yuh're on the job. 'Tween us we kin handle him easy as ropin' a two year old."

"I ain't got no more right to hold him up than you have," said Lorry, "but that's jest what I was aimin' to do, pervidin' he wa'n't travelin' with too much company. What yo're tellin' me 'bout that New York bank has got me figgerin'. He won't send them bills to no bank, an' he won't want to pack 'em round much. Mos' likely he'll send 'em some place where he kin pick 'em up. We'll jest mosey back to Red Mesa. I got a hunch we kin do better'n holdin' him up on the road."

THEY waited three days before Wetherly appeared in Red Mesa, and then he was not alone. Riding with him were Buck Ewing and two of his cowboys. Shorty reluctantly admitted he would have had little chance of holding up the formidable quartette, but grumbled none the less at the lost opportunity. Lorry had told him nothing more of his plans and by the time Wetherly appeared on the scene the little man was rapidly becoming a confirmed pessimist.

He had been assigned the duty of finding and keeping an eye on the man with a sunken jaw, and this he found no easy task. The Bat had a room in Two Finger Joe's establishment, and when he did appear he was as elusive as a thieving coyote. His only business appeared to be to keep more than pistol range between him and the two watchers, and in this he was eminently successful.

Wetherly arrived late in the evening and did not leave his room that night. In the morning he visited the express office and left a package, then with his three men rode at once out of town, taking the road back to Thunder Valley.

"I don't see as yuh've got anywhere," Shorty grumbled when Lorry reported the rancher's departure. "We'd orter o' jumped him up in the pass. Yuh ain't gonna git a look at that money now less yuh hold up the stage 'tween here an' Clearwater, an' that ain't the same thing as stickin' up a doggone thief that can't squeal."

Lorry's eyes twinkled as he listened to the little man. "S'posin' it comes to holdin' up the stage?" he suggested.

"I told Fallon I'd git a look at that money an' I'm gonna do it," Shorty replied stubbornly.

"I reckoned yuh'd feel that way," said Lorry with a grin of satisfaction, "an' yuh kin bet we'll shore git a squint at it. I ain't got no search warrants—takes too long to git 'em an' I don't bother with 'em much. If I want to find anythin' I jest nachelly go an' look fer it. If we find what we're after it'll be all right an' we'll be the curly headed boys. If we draw a blank it'll be different, but we gotta take the chance. What we're gonna do now is round up The Bat an' put him where he can't be buttin' in where he ain't wanted."

"What yuh goin' to do with him?" asked Shorty.

"Well, I'm kinda hopin' he'll start shootin'. That hombre needs some lessons an' I'll shore give him one that'll finish his schoolin'."

But their search for The Bat proved disappointing. He was not in Red Mesa and it was not until afternoon they found any trace of him. Then they

learned from a cowboy riding in that he had passed Wetherly and his party up in the pass and The Bat was with them.

"I'm shore disappointed not to git a word with that hombre," was Lorry's comment as they abandoned the search, "but he's out o' the way an' now we'll git busy."

The express office in Red Mesa occupied a corner of the big change stables, the last building on the one long street. Beyond, the road meandered off as if bent on losing itself in the sandy, sun scorched wilderness stretching to the western horizon. It was an end of town not much frequented except on the arrival and departure of the weekly stage. This was an off day and Red Moffit, glancing at the clock, shrugged his lean shoulders at the half hour that marked the distance to closing time, and began to gather up his books and papers preparatory to stealing that half hour for a gossip, and perhaps, if luck was with him a cooling drink or two at someone else's expense.

He swung open the door of the big safe and, turning to get the books piled on the end of the desk, stopped short, his hands extended, his mouth dropping open in a silly gape while the blood slowly drained from his sallow face leaving it a pasty white. Six inches from his nose the round hole of a six-gun grew larger and more threatening with every passing second, and behind it a pair of gray eyes with a glint of cold steel seemed asking him to make a move. Moffit did not move. He stood as if petrified while Lorry reached down and deftly removed his gun, and he obeyed like a man in a trance the drawled command.

"Put them hands where they kin scratch yore head—that's better. Now back up in that corner an' see how clost yuh kin come to lookin' like a Statue o' Liberty. Shorty, if he moves or peeps louder'n a prairie chicken feed him a chunk o' lead. I'm gonna take a look at this iron box."

MOFFIT had appeared incapable of making a sound, but as Lorry moved to open the safe, he gasped as if the meaning of the affair had just dawned on him. "Is this a holdup?"

"Shore thing," Lorry assured him. "A bony fidy, hundred to the dollar holdup with all the up-to-date trimmin's. Nobody can't say yuh didn't put up a durn' good fight, Moffit. Yuh kin tell 'em how yuh wrastled with terrible odds an' would 'a' had 'em all layin' out in a row, only yore gun wouldn't go off."

While talking, Lorry was working with sure swiftness. He took from the safe a square package heavily wrapped and sealed with great splotches of sealing wax, addressed to Dan Wetherly, Denver, Colorado. It was the same package he had seen earlier in the day in Wetherly's hands. He tore it open and, after removing a number of wrappings, disclosed several packages of bank bills of all denominations which he began to examine with feverish haste. The first few packages were a disappointment.

"I reckon these are what he got fer his ranch," he muttered as he laid them aside. "Now we're comin' to it. Take this paper, Shorty, put yore brand on it so's yuh'll know it agin—it's a list o' some o' the stolen bills. Check 'em up with this wad o' dough. I'll keep an eye on friend Moffit. I'm jest hopin' he'll open his handsome mouth to yell, 'cause my finger's itchin' somethin' fierce to pull the trigger. I got a copper riveted hunch Moffit'd make a beautiful corpse. It'd be a Christian act to snuff him out 'cause then he wouldn't need to tell no lies 'bout this holdup. What d'yuh say, Shorty? Hadn't we orter give him his ticket to the graveyard? Got yore tally? Pass it over an' take yore turn entertainin' our distinguished guest while I put 'em away."

He gathered up the bills and restored them to the original package which he tied securely with string, then replaced it in the safe. Turning to the pale faced man in the corner, he pulled open his shirt. Do you see this, Moffit," he asked; pointing to the silver badge while the mocking light in his eyes changed to a steely glitter. "This is a holdup all right, but it's a holdup yuh ain't gonna squeal about. I got a hunch yuh knowed what's in that package, but whether yuh did or yuh didn't, it's up to you to see it's right there in that safe when it's wanted. If it ain't there an' everythin' in it jest as I leave it, yuh won't have no use fer yore name fer a long time—yuh won't be nothin' but a number."

As the two men went out to the sunlit street a backward glance showed them Moffit, still in his corner, staring after them with an expression in which vindictive rage struggled with mortal fear.

IT WAS late the following day and Lorry sat alone in his room with many sheets of paper before him on which he had recorded with much labor a history of his discoveries. He was audibly cursing the red tape which made such things as reports necessary, when Shorty burst into the room panting with excitement.

"That doggoned, red headed ink slinger's doublecrossed us!" he shouted as soon as the door was closed.

"What's he done?" demanded Lorry shortly.

"He's sent word to Wetherly."

"How do yuh know?"

"I jest met that old feller that lives in the shack where the road crosses the creek an' he says to me, 'Yuh was lookin' fer the feller Kroslo that's got a broken jaw, wa'n't ye?' I says I was, an' he tells me that last night 'bout nine o'clock Moffit comes walkin' out from town an' stopped on the bridge like he was waitin' fer somebody. After 'bout half an hour Kroslo comes ridin' down from the pass. They talked some an' then Kroslo rode back up the hill like he was in a helluva hurry. He'll be more'n half way to the Dumbbell by now."

Lorry's face had become very serious. He was silent for a full minute, staring at the dingy ceiling. then he asked, "Yuh don't s'pose the old feller could be mistaken?"

"No fear," said Shorty. "There was a bright moon last night, an' his shack's close by the bridge. Doggone the luck! Wetherly'll hit fer the mountains an' he'll have start enough to git clean away!"

"I ain't worryin' none 'bout him gittin' away," said Lorry, who was now on his feet gathering up his papers. "He can't go nowheres I can't foller. What scares me is what he'll do 'fore he hits the trail."

"I don't git yuh," said Shorty looking puzzled.

"Ain't he swore to git Silver Ransome? If I know anythin' o' Dan Wetherly's breed, soon's he finds out he's caught he'll go loco, an' he'll git Silver Ransome if it's the last thing he does this side o' hell. Git the hosses, Shorty, we're gonna travel. Mebbe we're gonna kill them pore broncs, but we shore gotta *ride!*'

Chapter VIII

MANY times during the night the two men blessed the brilliant moonlight that made fast riding possible. They eased their horses on the climb up the pass and down the steeper inclines on the other side of the divide, but when they reached the level floor of Thunder Valley they rode with a lack of mercy for their willing animals which spoke louder than anything else could have done of the strain they were under.

The sun was several hours high when they pulled up at the Triangle C on spent horses. Lorry breathed a thanksgiving when he found the gossip loving owner was absent. They helped themselves to fresh horses from the saddle horse corral, and within a few minutes were pushing on more rapidly than ever. Hardly a word had passed between them since they left Red Mesa. Both men were riding with compressed lips and lowering brows that betokened an anxiety too acute for words.

As they raced by the mouth of the gorge leading to Jacob's Well, Lorry suddenly reined in his horse with a smothered exclamation, and swinging about, galloped into the narrow gulch. Shorty, taken by surprise, went on some paces before he could stop and turn. Following Lorry into the gorge he saw at once the cause of the sudden move. It was a fleabitten gray mare, which he knew as he knew his own hand, ambling slowly down the trail dragging a tie-rope to which was attached a piece of broken branch.

Shorty's face went pale. He spurred his horse with a vicious dig and overtook Lorry as he stopped to examine the mare. Aside from the broken branch there was no sign of anything wrong, but one thought struck both men which made them stare into each other's eyes with dark foreboding—the mare would never stray away from Sybil.

Without a word the two men pushed by the mare and raced along the trail to the willow grove by the spring. Crowding through the tangled thicket they called at every step, but there was no

answer. Their anxious, searching eyes found nothing until, riding out of the thicket at the base of the cliff, they looked down on the sprawling figure of Long Pete. The bullet hole in his forehead told only too plainly the story of what had happened in that quiet grove. Lorry, after a hasty examination of the body, concluded the shooting had been done at least two hours earlier. The face he lifted to Shorty was twisted painfully.

"Pears like we're too late fer the openin' chorus," he said in a tone that denied any intention of humor. "Somebody's shore gonna pay fer this, an' mebbe this ain't all they're gonna settle fer."

He swung into the saddle and led the way at a run. They stopped to take the gray mare in lead, then covered the distance to the Circle Bar at the top speed of their horses, hardly daring to imagine what they might find there. As they rode up to the big white house they were conscious of an unusual stillness about the place. There were but few saddle horses in the corral and not a man in sight. The door of the house stood open and they rushed in without ceremony, Shorty leading the way to the blind man's den. This door also was open and the sight of the silver haired man in his armchair and Pierre standing by the window gave them a relief that was almost a shock.

Silver's face was turned toward the door and as they stopped he called out, "Is that you, Shorty?"

"Yeah."

"Who's with yuh?"

"Lorry—that's to say, Tims."

"What are yuh doin' here?" Silver demanded, turning his face to Lorry. "I thought we was rid o' yuh. Yuh kin ride right on to the Dumbbell where yuh belong."

"It's all right, Silver," Shorty exclaimed. "He ain't no Dumbbell man—he's a United States marshal an' he's got Wetherly looped an' busted!"

"We ain't got no time fer fam'ly histories," Lorry broke in impatiently. "D'yuh know where Sybil is, Mr. Ransome?"

"I don't. She went out ridin' this mornin' early, sayin' she was gonna climb The Lions, an' she ain't come back. Long Pete was trailin' her an' there can't be nothin' much wrong, but the boys have all gone up to look fer her."

"She ain't up there," Lorry declared. "Long Pete's layin' down at Jacob's Well with a hole in his head. The mare was wanderin' but Sybil wa'n't there."

For an instant the blind man appeared incredulous, then he sprang out of his chair and his face became something so terrible in its fierce anger, Lorry felt a thrill of wonder. It seemed almost as if the shock had given those sightless eyes power to see.

"If Dan Wetherly's touched that gal, I'll take the skin off him an inch at a time." The soft voice had taken on the quality of something deadly; it made Lorry think of the singing of a flying bullet. "My God!" Silver cried. "Why ain't the boys here!"

"Shorty an' me's here," said Lorry. "We're ridin' to the Dumbbell an' we'll shore make things interestin' there till yuh send the boys after us."

FOLLOWED by Shorty he ran out of the house and to the corral. They roped two of the fastest horses of Shorty's string, and in a few minutes were on the road to the Dumbbell ranch, Lorry leading the gray mare. Fifteen miles of road lay between the two ranches. They had covered ten of them, riding at breakneck pace with occasional pauses to breathe the horses, when Lorry suddenly pulled up.

"Hold up, Shorty!" he shouted. "I told yuh I was a dod-blasted fool an' I'm a durn sight worse. I'm jest a bronc fightin' idiot. Sybil wa'n't taken to do *her* any harm; she was stole to draw all the men away from the Circle Bar! That's where Wetherly's gonna hit an' he'll strike like a rattlesnake. Silver's all alone with the French boy. You hike back fast as yuh kin travel, an' if yuh ever pray, pray that yuh'll git there in time. Yuh kin tell Silver I'm lookin' after Sybil."

Shorty did not wait for any second telling but turned and rode on the back trail as fast as he had come, while Lorry continued on. He was not so easy in his mind as he professed to be regarding Sybil's safety. Under any ordinary conditions he knew she would have nothing worse to fear than some discomfort and anxiety, but she had Wetherly to deal with, and it would be a new Wetherly. Unless he much misread the man, find-

ing himself concerned, with nothing left but flight, the hatred he had covered for years with his jovial mask would take possession of him and drive him to any desperate deed that would satisfy his passion for revenge. It was a very anxious Lorry who rode around the 'ast bend and came into view of the Dumbbell ranch.

The ranch-house itself was hidden behind a heavy screen of trees. By leaving the road and keeping close under the cliff Lorry kept this grove between him and the corrals, and he rode fast hoping to reach the cover of the trees without being seen. In this he appeared to be successful. When, after tying the horses in the grove, he stole through to the other side, he saw the reason. A number of horsemen were riding away from the big corral. In the lead rode Buck Ewing followed by several men each leading a pack horse. Some little distance in the rear was Barney the Bat.

The Bat appeared to be lingering for, though unhampered by a pack horse, the gap between him and the other riders grew steadily longer. When the others had turned the corner of the barn, heading straight for the Snake Mountains on the other side of the valley, he swerved suddenly, and trotting over to the ranch-house, jumped off his horse and went in.

Lorry did not wait to see more. He knew nothing about the arrangement of the house nor who he was likely to find there, but he shrewdly guessed there would be no one to cope with but The Bat unless he was wrong in believing Wetherly had gone to the Circle Bar. Somewhere in there he felt sure he would find Sybil Ransome. Running swiftly across the open space, he darted in through the door, then stopped to listen. There was not a sound, and if he had not seen The Bat come in he could have believed he was in an empty house.

He was in a long passage on both sides of which were closed doors. Stealing to the nearest of these, he was listening intently for any sound of movement on the other side when, from farther down the passage, came the sound of a woman's voice high pitched and angry. In a few swift strides he reached the door from behind which the voice still sounded mingled with the deeper rumble of a man's tones.

He flung the door open and caught a flashing glimpse of Sybil Ransome in the far corner of the room struggling in the arms of The Bat. From Lorry's lips came a sound like the snarl of an angry cat as he leaped into the room. The Bat, startled by the noise of the opening door, with a lightning like move swung the girl in front of him.

Crouching down behind her, he held her firmly with an arm about her waist while with the other he pushed his gun to the front and poured a stream of lead across the room. Then The Bat got his lesson in shooting. Lorry fired once and The Bat's gun arm fell limp, plowed by the bullet from wrist to elbow. Releasing the girl he stooped to pick up the gun with his left hand. Lorry fired again and he slithered to the floor and lay still.

"Quick," cried Lorry. "Where's Wetherly?"

Sybil's face was still flushed and her brown eyes were flashing with anger, but at Lorry's question the color faded and into her eyes came a look of horror.

"Oh!" she cried, running to Lorry and tugging at his arm, "Come! Come! We must hurry. Wetherly's gone to the ranch to kill dad!"

"How long has he been gone?" demanded Lorry.

"About half an hour. Hurry, hurry!" she urged. "Are you going to stand here all day and let him kill dad?"

"Don't yuh worry none about that," Lorry soothed the excited girl. "He musta gone by the mountain trail an' Shorty'll beat him hands down. He won't do no killin' after he gits in range o' Shorty's gun. All the same we'll git movin'. Like as not Fallon an' the rest is back 'fore now, an' they'll shore make it warm fer Dan Wetherly."

"Where is Fallon? I thought he was to be at the ranch all day breaking horses."

"Him an' the boys went up on The Lions lookin' fer you. How come yuh was down to Jacob's Well?"

"I changed my mind when I got up on the hogback and swung over to the gulch and so down to the spring. Buck Ewing and another man must have been trailing me. They killed poor Pete and brought me here."

"How come that they left the mare?"

"They were afraid to bring her past the ranch. We came up the other side

of the valley, but anybody at the Circle Bar would know the mare as far as they could see her. They tied her to the willows and put me on Pete's horse."

While talking they were moving rapidly, out of the empty house and through the grove to where Lorry had tied the horses. As they rode out from under the trees Lorry cast a longing glance at the already distant procession moving across the plain.

"Did that feller Ewing handle yuh rough?" he demanded.

"Not more than I gave him good excuse for," she answered with a flash in her brown eyes. "I don't think they meant to hurt me. Wetherly told me they would leave me locked in the house until somebody found me, but he raved like a crazy man about what he would do to dad. That horrible man you shot said *he* intended to take me into the mountains and hold me for a ransom."

At the recollection of Wetherly's threats against her blind father, she dug her heels into the mare and the swift little animal shot ahead at a pace which threatened to leave Lorry far behind. For a moment he tried to keep up, but finding it hopeless he was obliged to call to her to pull up.

"Jest try an' recollect," he grumbled as he drew alongside, "this ain't no racin' machine I'm ridin'. Like as not we'll run into some o' Wetherly's gang 'fore we git to the Circle Bar, an' the place fer you ain't out in front."

But it was no easy task to keep the impatient girl in check. Time after time he was obliged to warn her when the mare forged ahead. As they drew nearer the Circle Bar this happened with increasing frequency and her obedience was less prompt. They were rounding the shoulder of the cliff which shut off the ranch buildings from view when they were startled by the near sound of pistol shots.

They were riding side by side, and Lorry, leaning over, grasped the girl's bridle and pulled the horses to a stop. "You wait here," he ordered, "till I see who's makin' all the racket."

Sybil's eyes flashed angrily, but there was something in his curt tone and the grim look on his face which curbed her inclination to rebel. Taking it for granted she would do as she was told, Lorry rode on around the point and right into the thick of trouble. He was so close to the scene of battle he had little time to take in the detail. He had a swift vision of a man crouched behind a dead horse close up under the cliff, and two horsemen who were riding swiftly in, firing a series of rapid shots at the man behind the horse, and galloping just as swiftly out of range. He had no time to recognize any of the faces, but he noted the one white stocking on the dead horse with a sinking heart, for it told him Shorty had not reached the Circle Bar.

Shooting as he went, Lorry spurred straight for the two riders who were converging on Shorty from two directions. The nearest man toppled from his saddle. The other took one swift shot at Lorry, then swung about and raced off across the valley. Lorry followed a few yards shooting rapidly, but whether hit or not the man stayed in the saddle, and Lorry gave up the chase.

Shorty was already on his feet with coiled rope in his hands, stalking the riderless horse. Just as the noose settled over the animal's head a gray streak flashed by them. Lorry yelled and then swore, but this time the girl was deaf. She only increased her speed, and though Lorry spurred cruelly to catch up with the flying mare, he lost ground steadily. When he reached the gate of the home pasture she was several hundred yards ahead.

She reached the house and Lorry groaned when he saw her leap from her horse and run up the steps. Looking over the roof of the building he could see a line of riders coming down the zigzag mountain trail from The Lions at reckless speed, and he groaned again at this proof that, save for the hunchback, Silver Ransome had been alone to meet his enemy.

His horse was still running when Lorry flung himself out of the saddle. He went up the steps at a bound. Two more took him to the door of the den. One look through the open door and he stopped short, his eyes widening with wonder.

At his feet, just within the threshold lay the dead body of Dan Wetherly. Silver Ransome sat in his armchair facing the door, and at his feet lay another body—that of the hunchback boy. But that Pierre was not dead was shown by the fact that Sybil, on her knees at his side, was rearranging the bandages

which the blind man had tried to put on before they arrived. On the table at Silver's elbow lay a six-gun with cracked and yellowed ivory butt.

FROM Silver Ransome they heard the story of Wetherly's last play for revenge, but it was not until much later, when Pierre was able to talk, that they learned it all.

The two were together in the room when the blind man's acute sense of hearing detected the sound of someone moving stealthily in the hall. Pierre was starting to investigate when Wetherly suddenly appeared in the open doorway with a leveled gun. Ordering Pierre to stand beside Silver's chair and keep his hands above his head, he began to taunt the blind man, unloading all the bitter hatred he had been feeding for thirty years, working himself into an immense rage. He raved until he had exhausted himself in vituperation, then suddenly cooled.

"Now I'm gonna kill yuh," he said, "an' so's yuh'll know when it's comin' I'm gonna count three—only yuh won't hear the three. One! Two——"

At the first count Pierre leaped in front of the blind man, and with reckless disregard of the leveled gun, sprang toward Wetherly as if he would grapple with the big rancher. Wetherly fired, and as Pierre sank to the floor he laughed. That laugh cost Dan Wetherly his life. The blind man said, in explaining the scene, that he aimed at the laugh. His aim was extraordinarily true, for his bullet hit Wetherly between the eyes.

The following morning Lorry stood beside his horse in front of the ranchhouse, his grinning face showing profound amusement. Now and again a chuckle rumbled in his throat and shook his shoulders. He was recalling the expression of Mike Fallon's face when the situation was made clear to him. There was a sound of someone moving in the hall and, a moment later, Sybil Ransome came running down the steps as she had done that other time.

"It appears to me," she said, coming to his side, "that you're in a great hurry to leave us."

"Don't yuh believe it," Lorry protested. "If I didn't have a lot o' business in Red Mesa yuh couldn't drag me away with a rope." He paused a moment, looking into the girl's brown eyes while his lips drew in a quizzical smile, then he went on. "The last time yuh was beggin' me to hit the trail."

"Was I?"

"An' then yuh sent me a message by Pierre to git out an' never come back."

"I didn't! I sent that message to an impertinent cowboy named Tims."

"I knowed that feller an' he was shore deservin' it. Seein' as my name's Jacob, an' yuh didn't mean it fer me, I'm comin' back—to the well."

MAKING ARROW HEADS

I SEEM to remember reading somewhere that the making of arrow heads by the Indians was something of a mystery. The following extract from the Lewis and Clark journals, written by Meriwether Lewis, may serve to make the matter plain:

"Many of them [Indians] made use of flint for knives, and with this instrument, skined the animals they killed, dressed their fish and made their arrows; in short they used it for every purpose to which the knife is applyed. This flint is of no regular form, and if they can obtain a part of it, an inch or two in length that will cut they are satisfyed. They renew the edge by flecking off the flint by means of the point of an Elk's or deer's horn. With the point of a deer or Elk's horn they also form their arrow points of the flint, with a quickness and neatness that is really astonishing. We found no axes nor hatchets among them; what wood they cut was done either with stone or Elk's horn. The latter they always use to rive or split their wood. . ."—

C. E. MULFORD

TOOLS OF THE COWBOY TRADE

Saddle, headstall, bit, spurs, rope, "piggin'-string."

With my ten dollar hoss
An' my sixty dollar saddle,
I'm a-goin' for to steal
Me a fine bunch of cattle.
Con a ti yi you-pee you-pee yay.

With my sixty dollar saddle
An' my two-bit man,
I'm a-stealin' all the cattle
That I possibly can.
Con a ti yi you-pee you-pee yay.

COWBOYS all over the West have sung these verses and fifty others like them from time immemorial. Of course leather is up these days, and to be strictly accurate the singer ought to quote the price of his saddle somewhat higher, say, around eighty-five dollars instead of sixty.

Time was when a puncher could go into the local saddle shop and have a full hand carved saddle made to meet his own individual desires and ideas—all for sixty dollars. But nowadays the cow-chaser who craves a brand new kack has to save up mighty near a hundred bucks before he can have his cravings satisfied.

There are almost as many different shapes of saddle trees, designs of carving, shape of skirts, stirrups and horn, as there are different cow outfits. The cow country is far from unanimous as to a standard saddle. Every district, outfit—yes, puncher—has its or his individual likes and dislikes. One saddle maker advertised that he was ready and willing to put the horn on the cantle if his customers wanted a saddle built backwards. Anything at all to please.

But it is fortunate that whatever the peculiarities of shape, saddles, grade for grade, cost about the same, a fair average being about $90. And with care such a saddle will last more than ten years.

Some very able cowpunchers possess extremely tacky outfits. But as a rule the good hands who make a business of cowboying on the open ranges, have a good saddle, with saddle blankets of Navajo weave and hair costing fifteen or twenty dollars more. Then any puncher needs a headstall. The principal difference between a headstall and a bridle is that the latter has a brow band and throat latch while the headstall merely slips over the horse's head with a slit for the right ear. Punchers favor the headstall because it can be more quickly adjusted to the varying sizes of the horses' heads, though there is more danger of a wise horse rubbing it off than where the throat latch is used. We can safely put an average price at $25 with bit.

You can buy a good serviceable riding bridle or headstall with reins and a hand forged bit stout enough for any sort of use for the sum of eight dollars. Then, on the other hand, you can get a bridle all tipped and trimmed with silver conchas, studs and tassels, fitted with a hand made, silver inlaid bit and fancy rein chains, and pay a hundred dollars. One will do just about as good work as the other when put on a cow horse. It's all the same to the horse. But it's a good deal up to the cowboy as to whether he owns a nifty outfit, or just a plain everyday workable bunch of stuff.

AS FOR spurs there is just as wide a difference of opinion there as in any other part of the cowdog's equip-

ment. One bronc buster will extoll the virtue of his long shank, spoke rowel, silver mounted gaffs; while another peeler, equally as good, will cling to his short shank, star rowel, home-made spurs. Some spurs have a shank that turns down, others turn up. There are big old Chihuahuas that have a spoke rowel two and a half inches in diameter and weigh a pound to the pair, while some good leg pattern spurs weigh but a few ounces. Whatever the shape or size of the spur there must be a leather strap by which to fasten it to the boot. This strap goes across the wearer's instep and supports the spur. Surely, one would think, cowboys can agree as to the shape of this strap. But no, sir! There are at least eight distinct styles of spur straps and as many different shapes of each style. There is the simple strap reaching from spur button to spur button without buckles. There are straps with buckles; wide straps with smaller straps interlaced; spoon shaped straps; straps with conchas and without; straps basket stamped, hand carved and plain. The average price is $1.75.

But with the ropes either you use a grass rope or a riata. The grass ropes include the maguey, yacht line and braided linen or cotton. The lengths vary from 30 to 50 feet, but forty feet is a good length; and if you can catch a steer or a calf with your 40-foot rope by using a seven foot loop which uses up about fifteen feet of it, you're doing all that any cow owner will expect of you. The riata is made of rawhide, usually four strand. Fewer of them are used. But these riatas are fine throwing ropes and do not get stiff in the rain as do those of the grass family, but they have to be handled by a dally man who can give and take, wrapping and loosening his rope about the saddle horn, for they do break with a sudden hard yank. *La riata* is the Spanish from which we have the corruption "lariat," which term is not used so much in the Southwest as is "lass-rope." Ordinarily the cowboy's lasso goes under the blanket term "rope." But his tie-rope, the short length of cotton or hair rope with which he ties his horse or leads another is always called "tie-rope." Tie-ropes have a way of getting away from their owners unless tied to the saddle or laid on or in the bed, where they are inviolate.

The "piggin' string" or "tie-down" is a short length of heavy cord, possibly ¼ to ⅜ inch in diameter with which calves or other cattle are hogtied for branding or contest work. One forefoot is usually first caught in the running noose at one end, then the two hind feet are drawn up across the foreleg, given two wraps and a hitch, and the animal is tied "three bones crossed." Good fair time for the average mounted roper to rope and tie a calf or a steer, giving the animal a thirty foot start, is about 24 seconds. In contests the feat is sometimes accomplished in 15 seconds, but that is not an average.

Romaine H. Lowdermilk

CHARLES E. BARNES

THE creator of those adventurous partners, Long-Un and The Runt, in this issue presents his first novelette in WEST, "Men of Red Mesa," a story we hope you have enjoyed as thoroughly as we have. A complete novel and more humorous tales of Long-Un and his half portion partner, are scheduled for future numbers of WEST.

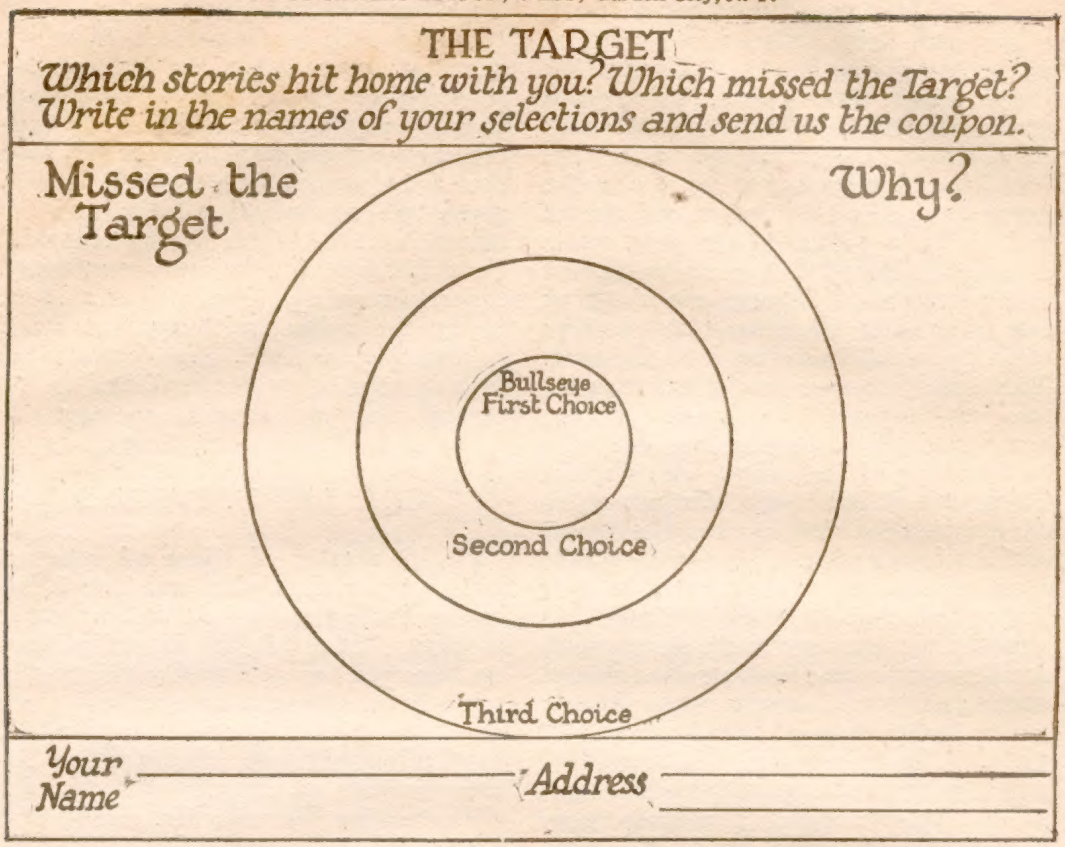
Concerning himself, Mr. Barnes has a word of self introduction.

"My writing career began back in a corner of New Jersey when I reached the mature age of twelve. With an imagination stirred by Mayne Reid and other portrayers of the Wild West and Indian warfare I determined to go them one better, and began the publication of a magazine of which I was the editor, publisher, printer and sole contributor.

"I say began because it started with the first and ended abruptly with the second number. It was written with pencil and the pages were pinned together. The edition was one copy, but circulation reached a full half-dozen by renting out the one copy at a cent a day. The first number went over with a bang and was a great financial success —it netted me at least a nickel—but the history of the second issue convinced me of the inborn cussedness of human nature. All my subscribers read it the same day for a total expenditure of one copper cent which, I remember, had a hole in it. This knockout blow put my literary ambition to sleep for so long I thought it was under the clover.

"Twenty years ago a breakdown in health sent me to the far West. Though

To TARGET EDITOR, WEST, Garden City, N. Y.



varied by travel on this continent and in Europe, most of those years have been lived in the saddle. I have logged with lumberjacks, ridden with cowboys, dabbled in mining and engaged extensively in irrigation work and fruit growing. My literary career would never have been revived had it not been for a little woman who for many years had had more faith in me than I had in myself. To my amazement I found a few people, including a kind hearted editor or two, who agreed with the little woman, and I don't feel at all bad to hear her say, "I told you so."

C. E. Barnes

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